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nonfiction

Jena **Snyder**

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Lynne Taylor **Fahnestalk**

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How much time do we really have to realize our dreams?

Travelin' shoes

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

ON MAY 3, 2004, ROBYN HERRINGTON, ONE OF THE MANY writers we've published in *On Spec* who later become good friends of mine, passed away after a courageous multi-year battle with cancer.

Robyn's death was a big wake-up call for me. I woke up the morning of May 5th with Ruthie Foster singing in my head:

Death come a knockin' on my sister's door
Sayin' come on, sister, are you ready to go?
So she set right down, buckle up her shoe
And she move on down to the Jordan shore
Then she shout
"Hallelujah! Done done my duty!
"Got on my travelin' shoes!"

The point is, you can have buckets of talent and plans to write a dozen novels, but it's a moot point if your life is cut short. How much time do we really have to realize our dreams?

I'd been thinking, too, about a conversation I had with Derryl Murphy this summer at WorldCon. I was complaining that everybody

seemed to be getting a book deal but me. What was I doing wrong? I'd been writing for years, learning my craft; I had an agent; I'd put 16 years—16 years!—into *On Spec*. Didn't that count for anything?

"Oh, it counts," he said. "But while you've been devoting your time and energy to publishing and promoting other writers, you've been helping build *their* careers, not yours. If you want to make a name for yourself, you've got to put your focus on *you*."

And so, after a lot of thought, I've handed in my resignation with *On Spec*. This issue is my last one as Production Editor, a position I've held since 1988, when the magazine was just a crazy idea a bunch of Edmonton writers had.

I love the people—**Diane Walton**, **Susan MacGregor**, **Holly Phillips**, **Derryl Murphy**, **Peter Watts**, **Barry Hammond**, **Steve Mohn**, **Elaine Chen**—and I dearly love the job, no matter how loud and long I bitch about it. I love working with the authors (okay, some I could have done without...), and although reading the slushpile was sometimes as much fun as a root canal, it taught me to recognize errors in my own work, and to be a better writer. Different *On Spec* calls for submissions spurred me to write and submit stories pseudonymously; I'm most proud of those sales, and the memory of the looks on my co-editors faces when revealed the truth. I'm also perversely proud of pushing all an illustrator's buttons at once with "Handicapped Help" from our humor theme issue (Winter 1991). She refused to illustrate the story because it was "ageist, racist, sexist, and offensive!" Wow. :)

Ultimately, my writing is why I'm leaving: I've been quietly beavering away at a book series for the past few years, and I'd like to see that work pay off. I'd also like to spend more time with family and friends rather than on my computer., and I'd like to spend more time at my second home, our lake cabin.

I've had a few people ask if *On Spec* will fall apart when I leave. Good grief, no! I'm just one person, and one part of an incredible group of people who drive this magic bus! Of course it will continue, and it will probably evolve and grow and change. I have faith in the future, and in my co-editors.

The requisite walk down memory lane

I suppose goodbye isn't complete without the requisite walk down memory lane...

In the summer of 1988, shortly after I began editing the Writers Guild of Alberta quarterly newsletter, I was invited to join a writers'

group called Copper Pig, a.k.a. **The Copper Pig Writers' Society**. Members back then (the ones I remember, at least) included the WGA Executive Director at the time, **Lyle Weis**, and one of the members of the guild executive board, **Hazel Sangster.** Other members of Copper Pig included **Marianne Nielsen**, **Diane Walton**, **Kathryn Sinclair**, and **Phyllis Shuell**.

I didn't know it back then, but I was the last piece needed to complete the jigsaw puzzle that became *On Spec* magazine.

The members of Copper Pig were all writers, but they had bigger dreams as well—they wanted to publish a magazine. All they needed was someone who could take their dreams and physically put them together into a format that would go on a press. Someone with experience with printers, with typesetting and layout. Someone like ... me?

I'm not saying they couldn't have done it without me—I was just the person who happened to have the experience and skillset they needed at that time. It sounded like fun, and I was thrilled to be included. Sure, count me in!

In that first issue we printed, none of us had titles. We didn't even have a masthead until our third issue (Spring 1990), and, feeling a little conflicted between writing and editing, I used my married name. By the fourth issue (Spring 1991), I decided there was no reason I couldn't be a writer and an editor—I had plenty of energy for both—and there I am: *Jena Snyder, Production Editor.* (I was General Editor for a few years in the middle of the magazine's run, but it wasn't the job for me: I'm better in the production end of things, working with the authors, doing the typesetting and layout, cracking the whip as printer liaison. In our humor issue, I'm listed in the masthead as *The Editor With An Attitude*, tribute to the fact that I was born with my foot in my mouth. I suppose the less said about that, the better.)

I'd like to thank everyone I've had the pleasure of working with at *On Spec* (especially Diane!) for what they've taught me about dedication and hard work. I know the magazine will continue to grow and evolve, and I wish everyone my best. As for me, I'll continue to spend time at the lake, writing, enjoying life, family, and friends, and above all, I'll be working on my novel series with a view to getting the books published and into readers' hands.

So wish me luck as I step off the edge of the cliff, my bundle of possessions slung over my shoulder, my dog at my heels. I've got some traveling to do before I head home. ✤

"Look, there's a fifty-fifty success rate," I'd said when Edmund brandished a roll of bills the size of a Buddha's fist. "She'll either lose her memory—or she'll die."

The Moment of Truth

E. L. Chen

"YOU SURE THAT THING'S CLEAN?"

"Yeah," I lie. "Roll up your sleeve."

"Fuck, that *hurts*."

"Don't complain, man. *You're* the junkie."

"Yeah, well, you're the fuckin' dealer. What does that make you? Ah—"

The moment of truth: will he give a scream of pain or a sigh of ecstasy?

"Ah … ah … *ahhh*…"

The latter, thank God.

"Hope you get it right this time," I say as I step over his twitching body, although I know he'll find me again in three months.

After all, statistics show that karma junkies are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

DOWNTOWN TORONTO IS A JUNKIE ON KARMA, FROZEN IN THE MOMENT OF truth, wondering how it'll turn out this time—whether it'll be

reborn, or end with a whimper. The city still shows evidence of its last hit: empty coffeehouses, boarded-up theatres, steel-and-broken-glass storefronts that once sheltered ritzy boutiques. Only the ground remains the same, no matter how many times the city once known as Toronto the Good reinvents itself—concrete, asphalt, and grass in smoggy shades of grey and brown. The color of a karma junkie's tongue.

She's waiting for me when I trudge home in the smoky orange-pink of approaching dawn. A mop handle with stringy hair and two bruises for eyes huddles on the front stoop of my building. Like the city itself—lean, stretched, hungry, although she once saw better days, was once a classy young thing.

At first I think she's an American drug tourist who's missed me during my nightly rounds, but then she peers up at me through her hair. "Please," she says, rocking back and forth on the cracked concrete step, her bony knees pressed together and tucked under her chin. "Please tell me you're Johnny D. You gotta help me forget."

Shit.

"If you want her killed, go down the hall," I'd told Edmund. "Apartment 305. Ask for Finch. Tell him I sent you. He'll do your dirty work."

"I don't really want her dead," he'd replied, his face turning heroin-white. "She's my wife, for God's sake. If there were another way, I'd take it. I only want her—incapacitated."

Incapacitated. The victim of a Good Samaritan tragedy, rehabilitating in a posh Swiss clinic while Edmund waited for the divorce to go through. At least that's what he'd told the press.

"Please," the mop handle says.

It's Veronica Tse.

Or, rather, the woman formerly known as Veronica Tse.

"Look, there's a fifty-fifty success rate," I'd said when Edmund brandished a roll of bills the size of a Buddha's fist. "She'll either lose her memory—or she'll die. You ever see a karma junkie at the moment of truth?"

The moment of truth—that frozen heartbeat before a sneeze, an orgasm, a seizure—and then you succumb to either ignorant bliss or a death rattle. If it's the former, you're no longer accountable for all the shit you pulled in your past life. Instant good karma.

If it's the latter, however—

"You can be charged with manslaughter if she dies," I said, proffering the need.

Edmund folded my fingers around the need's barrel, and then pulled another fat roll of bills from inside his jacket. "No," he said. "*You* can be charged with manslaughter if she dies."

I'd tried to argue with him some more, but in the end, the money outweighed the risk. My chosen brand of sleeping pills had recently rocketed in price. So the next week I found myself at the corner of University and Dundas, hovering outside the Lintel Networks office tower at noon. A flock of women in tailored pantsuits streamed through the glass double doors as I faked interest in a newspaper vending box.

LINTEL ANNOUNCES DISASTROUS FIRST QUARTER, the headline screamed. *President and CEO Veronica Tse refuses to comment.*

I wondered if one of the women was Edmund's mistress. "And a little boy," he'd admitted when I'd asked. No one would go through that much trouble to oust a CEO just because his stocks were down.

"Lintel is a sinking ship." A faint note of bitterness had crept into Edmund's otherwise steely voice. "The postwar recession in the States is destroying us. I'm CFO—we founded Lintel together—but she hasn't taken my advice since we IPO'd. So yes, there is another woman."

The glass double doors swung open again, and Edmund slithered through, his hand cupping a petite Asian woman's elbow. He nodded at something she said—and I knew that he was actually nodding at me. He released her arm. Veronica Tse descended the steps, her face obscured by a pair of sunglasses.

She strode north along University Avenue. Panhandling ex-pats lined the sidewalk as if anticipating a parade. I recognized a couple faces, and thought I knew a few more. But all Pats looked the same whether or not they'd had the war wiped from their memory—lost and desperate.

None of the Pats recognized me, probably because they were tripped out on whatever vices I'd sold them. Vices that had been outlawed by the fundamentalists who'd snuck into the White House while America was busy vilifying Stanton. Vices that were my bread and butter, thanks to the ex-patriots who'd fled across the border to seek oblivion in peace.

Judging from the hopeless looks in their eyes, they still hadn't gotten it right.

Karma junkies were doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, after all. Statistically proven. Karma burned the bridge between you and your long-term memories, but sometimes the past made it across the chasm, like an echo. And if you were a Pat, that was enough to make you realize who you'd been in your past life, and what you had done.

On the internet, you can still find the videos of American soldiers burning villages and torturing Congolese.

Karma junkies were trapped in a cycle of self-destruction. Made sense—if you knew you'd survived former President Stanton's mismanaged attempt to clean up southern Africa, you'd want to forget, too, and at all cost.

Or if you woke up behind a dumpster, without any clue to your identity except for a used need and an old bullet wound on your thigh—

"Hey!"

I glanced over my shoulder. A gorilla with a bad haircut was lumbering toward me.

"Hey—yeah, you, you little fuck," the gorilla said. "Where's my money?"

Dooley. Small-time thug with big-time attitude. "Fuck off. I don't owe you anything." I turned away and continued shadowing Veronica Tse.

Dooley caught up to me and shoved me so hard that I tripped backward over a parked bicycle. Sidewalk traffic parted and flowed around us, passers-by staring pointedly away from Dooley's hulking figure. I didn't blame them; Dooley tended to have that effect on people.

"You sold me bad karma, Johnny-boy," he said, kicking me in the stomach. "Gave it to one of my girls last night and she died. Now the cops are on my tail."

"You—*oof*—stupid shit," I gasped, shuddering more from the sudden sense of déja vu rather than the pain. I propped myself up on my hands, sweating from the effort of restraining myself from jumping to my feet and snapping Dooley's neck. *It'll be easy*, the back of my mind told me. *You've done it before*, my body told me. My arms shook from the tension.

Dooley kicked me again, and I collapsed back onto the concrete, twitching and panting.

I said, "There's no—*oof*—such thing as bad karma. It's Russian roulette every—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

A halo of henna-red hair. A porcelain face that ended in a point. Eyes out of a Modigliani painting: almond-shaped, amber-black, exotic and mysterious. The face of an angel. My heart stopped as if frozen by the moment of truth.

"You," Veronica Tse said, jabbing her shed sunglasses at Dooley. "Pick on someone your own size."

I gaped at her. The last person who'd stood up to Dooley had been found in the trunk of an abandoned car, sliced into ticker tape. Edmund's voice stole into my head: *We need to restructure the company, but she is too fond of lost causes.*

"Stay outta this, lady," Dooley growled.

She ignored him. "Are you all right?" she asked me, bending over and extending her hand. Startled, I scrambled to my feet without her help. *She is too… nice,* Edmund said in my head again, with disappointment, as if altruism were a weakness.

She snapped open her purse and rummaged through its contents. "I'm calling the police," she said.

"Hey." Dooley shot her a sleazy, gold-toothed grin that would charm hookers and dental hygienists off the street and not much else. "No need for that. This here's a private matter between friends. Right, Johnny-boy?"

Veronica pulled out a cell phone and said to me, "Would you like to charge this gentleman with assault?"

Another flash of gold, this time in Dooley's hairy paw. Gold, and the pale steel of a blade.

I reached into my jacket for my only defense. "Put the knife away," I said from between gritted teeth, flicking the plastic cap off of the need. Veronica's brow furrowed. But she faced Dooley and stood her ground, her thumb poised above the cell's keypad.

"I have 911 on quick dial," she said, eyes blazing a challenge. "So who are you going to attack first? Me, or him?"

I was just a dealer, another nobody on the skids. And yet she was risking herself for me. *She is too fond of lost causes.* Her sleeves slipped back an inch, baring her wrists. Her skin was so translucent that I could see the veins. The fingers wrapped around the need twitched in response. I found myself at a moment of truth. Edmund's cash, or Veronica's gratitude? Do I or don't I?

Dooley looked from her to me and back again, and made the decision for me.

His body slammed into hers. She toppled toward me. I instinctively put up my hands to catch her. The need bit into her neck like a vampire's kiss and stole her life.

Dooley swiped her fallen purse. "Pleasure doin' business, Johnny-boy." He treated me to a one-fingered salute and plodded away, back to whatever tree he'd swung down from.

"Unh …"

The sudden jackknifing of Veronica's body took me by surprise. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she slipped out of my arms onto the sidewalk. Her feet kicked as if she were trying to save herself from drowning. Her hands clawed at the air. She was still clutching the cell, her thumb depressing the keypad.

I'd never seen a karma junkie react so violently before. Then again, junkies were usually stocky six-foot ex-soldiers, not petite Asian women. "I'm sorry," I said in her ear as I rolled her over onto her stomach. I *was* sorry. She didn't deserve this, no matter how many Lintel shareholders were out for her blood. No matter how much Edmund was paying me.

Small, moist noises forced themselves from her arched throat. Sounded like a kitten choking on a wet sponge. I scooped her tongue out of her mouth. A string of drool bungeed to the ground.

"Your husband's right," I said, pushing her hair out of her contorted face. "You really are too nice. To nice for your own good."

"Unh … ah … ah…"

Sirens wailed in the distance. I pocketed the need and ran.

At home, I called up my bank and arranged to buy five hundred shares of Lintel at $2.75 a pop.

I'm just a dealer. But I'm not stupid.

"PLEASE," THE WOMAN FORMERLY KNOWN AS VERONICA TSE SAYS, ONE YEAR after I'd last seen her. "You gotta help me forget. I need karma."

"You know the risk?" I say.

"Yes. Yes, of course." She hugs herself and her shoulder blades jut from the threadbare denim of her jacket, making her look like a wingless, fallen angel. "If you knew … some things are worth the risk of forgetting."

"What's your name?"

"Jane." Short for *Jane Doe*, no doubt. Edmund had seen to that, claiming her from the hospital before she regained consciousness, and then—and then what? He hadn't paid me to ask questions.

Anyway, like everyone else, I'd believed that she was recuperating in Europe.

"Well, Jane, karma's going to cost you."

"I can pay." She names a pathetic sum.

"Not enough."

Her face sags as if she's about to cry, but her hollow cheeks tell me that she's already been wrung dry of everything.

"I've got nothing else," she says, "except myself."

"You hooking?"

She nods.

"What're the stock options like?"

She cracks a smile. Veronica Tse peeks out from behind the crinkling corners of her eyes. I smile back.

Come on inside," I say. I enter the lowrise and haul myself up the stairs to my apartment. Veronica—Jane peels herself off the front stoop and stumbles after me. Dawn follows as well, sneaking through the stairwell's broken windows. I shut the door in its nosy face.

"Have a seat." I sweep the art books off the bed. I bought them from the used books store when the haunting started, in an attempt to replace the images of body bags and gunfire with famous paintings. It had only worked for a month, but I'd kept them around because there's nothing else nice to look at in this neighborhood.

Jane perches on the cigarette-scarred sheets. She shrugs off her jacket, revealing bone-thin wrists and a mesh of track marks. She shivers, staring hungrily at the plastic baggies of white powder on the kitchenette counter. Bangs fall over her forehead and into her bruised eyes. The henna has long since washed out, leaving her hair the color and texture of dead leaves with at least six inches of dark roots.

If eyes are windows into the soul, this woman's panes are cloudy, cracked, shadowed. But occasionally her face tilts and sunlight pours from the cracks. That sunlight is Veronica, shining through in all her glory. Haunting me for the mistakes of the past. Compelling me to atone for what Edmund had done.

That's karma for you.

You're a fucking dealer. The words aren't convincing with Veronica playing peek-a-boo in Jane's eyes. *Make a fucking deal.*

"Let's talk," I say.

Jane nods and strips off her shirt. My mouth goes chalk-dry at the sight of soft curves—and my breath catches when I see the purple-yellow smear across her ribs that looks as if someone's been finger-

painting on her skin.

I hand the T-shirt back to her. Her brow wrinkles. "But I can't afford karma," she says.

"No," I say. "But I know someone who can."

Taking someone through Toronto's Chinatown is like leading Eurydice out of the underworld. You have to trust that she's following you, because if you look back, you'll lose her.

I squeeze past an ambling elderly woman and step in the pulpy remains of an exotic fruit. Jane's behind me, dodging similar obstacles: distracted shoppers, tour groups, grocers dragging trolleys piled high with crates. She can't miss me in this crowd since I stand head and shoulders above it—but if I turn around, I'll lose her in the sea of Asian faces.

Edmund financed a hit once. Maybe he'll do it again. Especially if he sees Jane—Jane the junkie, Jane the hooker, sweet, sweet Jane who's not-quite-Veronica yet could be if given the chance.

Anyway, she was his wife, for God's sake.

We reach the corner of Dundas and University. Lintel's glass tower looms over us, tall and impenetrable. "What if he doesn't want to see me?" she asks as we pass through the double doors.

I have no answer.

The oval-faced young woman sitting at the receptionist's station flies open-mouthed from her seat—then changes her mind and plops back down. "Mina Lau," I say into Jane's ear, reading the placard on the woman's desk. "Do you remember her?"

Jane shakes her head.

The hastily pasted-on smile keeps slipping from Mina's face. "Can I help you?" she says.

"We'd like to see Edmund Tse," I say.

The smile slides off. I glance at Jane. She's staring at Mina, no doubt forcing herself to remember her. "Jane," I hiss.

"Sorry," she says, diverting her attention to a potted plant.

I turn back to Mina, who has fixed and starched her smile to eerie perfection. She says, "Do you have an appointment?"

"Uh, no," I say.

"If you could wait a minute while I check if he's in...He may have gone to lunch."

It's two-thirty in the afternoon.

As she fiddles with her telephone headset, I notice the framed pho-

tographs lined up along her desk. Mina with friends. Mina with an oval-faced toddler. Mina with a lean, sleek-headed, cold-eyed man who has his arm thrown around her shoulders.

Edmund.

Another woman?

And a little boy.

Mina twists the headset's cord around her hand, drawing attention to the enormous rock on her ring finger.

She knows. She *knows.* Mina knows that Edmund arranged for his wife's doping, and she's terrified that Jane's memories have returned. She's terrified that Veronica will leap from Jane's downcast eyes and devour her for usurping her place at Edmund's side.

"I'm afraid he's out," Mina says in a high voice sweetened by panic.

One of the elevators in the hall behind her chimes and opens. Mina jumps. A man-shaped shadow flickers in the corner of my eye. I glimpse a sleek, black head duck back into the elevator, out of sight. Edmund's there, the coward.

Yeah, well, you were the hired help. What does that make you?

"Mr. Tse," I call out.

The sleek head turns, and Edmund's eyes briefly meet mine in the reflection of the mirrored hall. I rush past Mina's desk, but it's too late—the elevator doors are already closing.

"Please," Mina calls out after me, her white-knuckled hand clutching her headset. "Please. I—I'll have to call security if you …"

I storm back to the desk. "Come on," I say, grabbing Jane's elbow. Her arm feels like it could snap between my fingers. I recall how Edmund had cupped Veronica's elbow the first time I saw her. Did he feel the way I do now? Protective? Afraid of hurting her? If Jane is only an echo of her former self, what he felt toward Veronica should've been very strong indeed. How could he have cold-bloodedly sent her off to be—incapacitated?

Yeah, well, you were the one who doped her. What does that make you?

I have no answer.

Jane's hand finds mine. She squeezes once, twice. I squeeze back.

JANE TAKES THE LEAD THROUGH CHINATOWN, FLYING AHEAD OF ME AT AN incredible pace. She never looks back once.

At my apartment, she pushes past me into the kitchenette and rifles through the bags of white powder. "I need a fix," she says. "I'll

do anything. Blow job in front of the neighbors, anything. I just need a goddamn fix."

She plucks a bag from the counter. I wrench it from her fingers. She looks up at me, finally. Her expression is fierce; Veronica peers out of her eyes, determined to make a stand.

"That's pancake mix," I say.

She stares at me—and laughter bursts from her mouth, shaking her body like wind through a sapling, shaking it until tears drop like overripe fruit.

"What kind of person was I," she says, "if my own husband doesn't want to see me? Or is it the person I am now that he's ashamed of?"

"There's nothing wrong with you. There never has been." I retrieve a dusty tissue box from under the bed. Jane snatches a handful of tissues and buries her nose in them.

"God, it's been one long nightmare that I can't wake up from."

"I know," I say.

For the second time in her life—or, rather, the first time in her second life—she falls into my arms. Her body is thinner and frailer than I remember. My lips press against her hair. She smells like soap and stale cigarette smoke.

"You can't understand," she sobs into my shoulder.

"Yes," I say. "I do."

Veronica surfaces again, steady and sophisticated. She pulls back, wipes her eyes, and says, "Johnny isn't your real name, is it?"

"It is now."

I sink onto the bed and look at my hands. They've been pretty good to me the past couple of years—always surprising me with their dexterity as I measure dope and cap needs—but lately they've been shaking during the day, as if remembering things that my brain has forgotten. They've always shaken at night, but the sleeping pills take care of that.

"I was reborn in an alley with a used need in my hand," I say. I still remember the sour milk smell of the dumpster I'd been propped up against, and the cool, thin, unidentifiable liquid that pooled around my splayed fingers. "I was sitting on the ground next to another man, who was also holding a need. He hadn't survived the moment of truth." I still remember the smell of him, too, and the feel of stiff flesh against my palms as I pushed him away.

"No money, no ID. I ran as far as I could from the dead body and found a busy street. I asked people for help, but they all treated me

like shit, like I was a drunken Pat. So I figured I *was* shit. You know how it is. When you're reborn, you scramble for an identity because that determines how you act with others. You take what you can get, as soon as you can get it. Wait too long, feel sorry for yourself, and people take advantage of you."

Jane's laugh is bitter and wet with choked-back tears. "At least you didn't end up hooking. There can't be a worse fate than that."

"Yes, there is," I say. I slowly unbutton my shirt and show her the scar tissue along my left side. She blanches. "Shrapnel. There's another scar on my thigh—bullet wound. The nurse at the homeless shelter told me. He treated me like shit, too."

Anyone else would've walked out, turned away in disgust, or ranted about Stanton's foreign policy. And everyone else I'd met had. But Jane's face is solemn yet compassionate. I can almost believe that this fallen angel had once been Veronica Tse, the woman who stood up for me in front of Dooley.

"Eventually I figured out why," I say, "but I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that I'd been an American soldier. But then the haunting started."

She nods, and suddenly she's Jane again, timorous and vulnerable. She knows what I'm talking about—the snippets of your past life that bubble to the surface, usually during your sleep. "At least you have the dreams," she says, bitterly. "I wish I did. If only I *knew* that there'd once been more to my life than—than *this*."

I stare at her. "You don't get—"

"—haunted? No." She wraps her arms around herself and shivers. I remember that Veronica's reaction to the karma had been more violent than any junkie I'd ever seen at the moment of truth. One dose was more than enough for an ex-soldier, let alone a petite woman. Her past must be burned from her brain for good.

I envy her.

"It's not all that it's cracked up to be," I say, and the memory of blood and fire must be evident in my voice, because she bites her lip and sits beside me on the bed. I squeeze her hand. "It's okay," I say. "I don't get the nightmares anymore. I was told sleeping pills would stop them. Most Pats don't take that route because alcohol's cheaper, and helps you get through the day as well as the night."

Veronica gazes out from Jane's eyes, offering sympathy I don't deserve. I quickly look away.

"But you need a prescription to get a dose strong enough. So I

found a dealer who could get them for me, and he let me work for him in exchange for the pills. A couple years ago he got put in jail for selling to minors, so I took over."

"You're lucky," she says, and the weariness in her voice makes me feel small. "You've made something of this life. Otherwise you would've—"

"Taken karma again?"

She says, "Karma junkies—"

"—are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Yeah, I know. That's what keeps me in business." I shrug. "My neighbor Finch, he's also a reborn Pat. He discovered that he's good at killing people, and now he does it for a living. We figure that as long as we don't have time to feel sorry for ourselves, we'll be okay."

Jane studies her feet and says, quietly, "The first thing I remember was lying in a field with this guy standing over me, shaking me, trying to wake me up. He was nice—at first. Sympathetic. He gave me some money and got me a rented room. And then ... and then he wanted me to pay him back."

I clench the rumpled sheets in my fists. "Like I said, you take what you can get. I know what you're going through, I know how hard you hit when you hit bottom. You start thinking that you deserve this life, because you must've had nothing to lose when you took karma."

"Oh God," she gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. "I must've done something awful in my past life, if no one tried to find me, not even my husband—"

"No," I say, flatly. No one had tried to find Veronica because thanks to Edmund, they didn't even know she'd been lost. "You had everything to lose. And I'm going to help you get it back."

"Why?" she says, turning her tear-stained face toward me. "Why would you help me? I'm just a hooker, a junkie."

Her pointed chin fits perfectly above my fingertips. "Because a year ago I met this amazing woman who refused to see me the way others see me, the way I see myself. I owe her for that. If I can make you see yourself differently, maybe I can repay her."

Jane wipes her eyes and touches my cheek with wet fingers. Then she slips off her jacket—and more. This time I don't hand her clothes back to her.

KARMA JUNKIE STATS NEVER TELL YOU HOW INCREDIBLE THE SEX IS WHEN YOU don't remember your past relationships. Jane and I have forgotten all

the heartbreak and hang-ups, thank God. We explore each other like teenagers, full of curiosity and giddy hormones, the euphoria better than any drug she's tried, better than any drug I've sold.

"Tell me again," she says.

"You were beautiful. Like an angel painted by Modigliani." Now she's painted by Matisse; there are vivid purple and yellow undertones where the bruises haven't yet healed.

I push into her, straining, sweating. I find myself at a crossroads: prolonged pleasure or immediate ecstasy? A moment of truth. *Veronica,* I think, succumbing to the latter choice.

Jane, as if she hears me, answers, "Yes…yes…"

It's like being reborn. But unlike a hit of karma, we know full well what we've put behind us to find each other.

STREETLIGHTS GLITTER IN THE NIGHT SKY LIKE RHINESTONES. JANE GAZES OUT the window, fingers spread on the glass, as I drive Finch's van north of the city and hope the fake plates don't attract the cops. I don't have a driver's license, let alone insurance.

Jane—sweet, sweet Jane—has a reason to live now. A reason to live this life, but not the means to do it.

She was smart and sophisticated once; she can be Veronica again. Rehab is expensive, however, and so is school. There just aren't loans and scholarships for junkie ex-hookers. My Lintel stock is doing well, but we've agreed not to touch it unless we have to.

Which leaves Edmund.

I pull into the parking lot of the suburban hotel hosting Lintel's annual booze-and-schmooze. Finch's black van disappears in the shadows of luxury SUVs. I smooth down my shirt and tie. "How do I look?"

Jane kisses me. "Like a respectable shareholder." She's wearing a navy pantsuit that we found at Goodwill. Almost makes her look like Veronica, despite her bruised cheekbones. There's only so much that drugstore makeup can cover.

I show the invitation to the hotel's concierge, who points us toward a ballroom at the end of a plushly carpeted corridor. Lintel's shareholders, investors and other business contacts cluster in chattering cliques of two or three. Tuxedoed waiters flit from group to group, bearing wine glasses and hors d'oeuvres on silver trays. A string quartet plays in the far corner.

Jane squeezes my hand, takes a deep breath, and steps over the

threshold.

Silence spreads from our entrance like ripples in a pond. The hushed crowd parts like the Red Sea, revealing Edmund with Mina Lau on his arm. The string quartet gamely continues, but falters when Edmund raises his hand.

He turns around, as sure and righteous as Moses.

"Veronica, my dear," he says, showing no emotion except concerned astonishment, "what a surprise! The clinic didn't tell me that you were to be released so soon."

The color drains from Jane's face. Even her bruises pale. A faint cry escapes from her throat, and she spins on her heels and darts out the exit.

Edmund nods at the quartet, and the music starts up again. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," he says, slithering for the door. I'm already two leaps ahead of him and running down the hallway.

I find Jane in the lobby, collapsed against a marble wall. Her breath heaves in great sobs. "That can't be him. That can't be my—my *husband.*" She spits out the last word with terror and disbelief.

"You know him?"

"He's the one who gave me *this.*" Her hand drops to her side and gingerly traces the purple and yellow stripe that still hasn't healed. "He's the one who found me. He's the reason why I found you."

I crouch in front of her. "What are you talking about?"

"If those people in there only knew the *things* he's made me do... He's my pimp," Jane whispers, her eyes round and staring.

That sadistic son of a bitch. As if taking Veronica's life wasn't enough; he'd personally ensured that her next one was a living hell. That sick, sick bastard brings new meaning to the expression *flogging a dead horse.*

Footsteps graze the carpet behind us. I stand up and turn around. Edmund pierces me with a cool, level gaze.

"Please escort your *companion* from the premises," he says. The glance he flicks at Jane brims with hate and contempt. Hate for the woman she'd been, and contempt for the woman she is now. "I do *not* want a scene in front of my shareholders. Seeing Veronica is enough to make them wonder if she's returning to Lintel. The stock price is going to open at a new low tomorrow morning."

"We just need some money," I say. "Just enough to give her a fresh start. Or else we'll go to the police. To the media. I'm sure they'd be interested to know that Veronica never saw the inside of that Swiss clinic."

Edmund raises an eyebrow. "Blackmail, John? May I remind you that *you* were the one who administered the karma?"

Jane springs up at Edmund. "You're lying," she cries, clawing at the lapels of his suit. I tear her off of him. She trembles against my chest.

"Johnny's done nothing but help me," she says, but she sounds like she's trying to convince herself, not Edmund.

There's no other explanation for Edmund knowing my name, after all.

"I must commend you on your audacity," Edmund says. "Using Veronica to extort money from me. Such greed. If you weren't a karma junkie, I'd make you CFO."

"I'm not a junkie," I say. "I'm a dealer. And I'm not using her. I only have her best interests at heart."

Edmund shakes his head, his cold eyes clear and placid. "John. Think about it. Even if your intentions are noble, who will people believe? The CEO who made Lintel profitable again? Or a karma junkie and his whore?"

"I'm *not* a junkie! I told you, I'm a just a dealer."

It isn't until security drags us outside that I realize that I hadn't protested Edmund's use of the word *whore* as well.

Jane's face is hard, unreadable, her lips pressed in a thin line.

"Bastard," she says.

I hope she's talking about Edmund.

JANE HAS ALREADY OPENED THE DOOR WHEN I PULL FINCH'S VAN INTO THE apartment parking lot. "I gotta go," she mumbles, struggling with her seatbelt.

"Jane—" I seize her wrist.

She doesn't look at me. Won't look at me. "I need to go for a walk. Clear my head. Think things over."

"At this time of night? In this neighborhood?"

"I've been out later. And in worse places."

I can't argue with that. Her hand snaps from mine like a wet dishrag and she melts into the shadows.

The aging van protests as I jerk the gearshift in reverse. I circle the block a few times. She's gone. I turn onto the main street, committing myself to a full-fledged search. I drive to the east end of the city, toward her old haunts. I can't think of any place else she'd go.

The street is speckled with working girls. And boys. And boys

dressed as girls. Preening and flaunting in front of the motorcade of potential johns. An androgynous skeleton in a miniskirt spots me and blows me a kiss. They all know me—Johnny D., the guy who can make the nightmare go away for a little while, for a small price.

It's a living, I tell myself.

I inexplicably feel ill.

No sign of Jane. I don't know whether to be worried or relieved.

I DROP FINCH'S CAR KEYS INTO HIS MAILBOX IN THE LOBBY AND DRAG MYSELF upstairs. A sickly yellow light bleeds from the crack under my door. The door itself is unlocked.

"Where've you been?" Jane says.

"Where've *I* been? Where've *you* been?"

"I went for a walk." She sways, and braces herself against the kitchenette doorframe. Sweat trickles down her temples.

"Honey," I say, "you've every right to be angry with me, every right to feel betrayed—"

She silences me with an aggressive, probing kiss.

"What was that for?" I ask once I've caught my breath.

"For being the first person to see me as *me,* instead of a—a doormat. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't've had the balls to go through with it."

A chill creeps down my spine and plants icy tendrils in my stomach. "Go through with what?"

"I stole his life from him. Like he stole mine."

Her eyes are bright, glittering. I scan the kitchenette. Nothing seems to be misplaced.

"Don't worry," Jane says, "I didn't touch the karma. I went down the hall. Apartment 305."

The icy tendrils wind themselves around my innards and squeeze. Finch. I shake my head and say, "I guess Edmund had it coming to him."

Jane laughs. "Oh, Johnny, you've got no imagination. I wanted to steal Edmund's life like he stole mine. I wanted him to feel lost, worthless, helpless—like a karma junkie after a hit."

Her words run together like a string of beads, rattling and rubbing against each other and following the next without hesitation. Her pupils are dilated; her cheeks, flushed. She must be high. The question is: on what? Smack? Or sadism?

She giggles. A little of both, most likely.

"After the fuss dies down, Finch'll hook me up with a lawyer who'll contest the divorce settlement, and you and I are gonna be rich, baby, *rich*—"

"Jane," I say, seizing her by the shoulders, "what did you do?"

"It won't cost very much. Finch is gonna do it for a percentage of the settlement. It's almost like—" She giggles again. "Two for the price of one."

"Jane—what the *fuck* did you do?"

"Mina Lau," she says, meeting my stare at last with her too-bright, too-wide eyes, grinning from ear to ear as if I'd be proud of her. "And her little Eddie."

The other woman. And her little boy. Her and Edmund's little boy.

WE MAKE LOVE, JANE PURRING AGAINST MY SCARRED SKIN, MYSELF TOO SHELL-shocked to peel her from my body. She gazes at my face, eyes half-lidded, and I'm not sure if it's the sex or the pleasure of revenge eaten cold that's putting the smile on her face.

The smile of a cold-blooded sadist, my long-suffering conscience tells me.

Yeah, well, you're the one fucking her. What does that make you?

The smile of a murderer, my conscience says.

Don't complain, man. You're *the Pat.*

My conscience shuts up.

Afterward she lounges against the pillows, basking in the afterglow. She's so beautiful. The pale spirit of Veronica Tse. A lost soul out of a ghost story.

Maybe it's for the best. She has her revenge out of the way. Now we can get on with our lives. Together. We can move out of this city, maybe to the west coast, somewhere far from the U.S. border and the steady stream of drug tourists and Pats. Somewhere without snow. Somewhere we can start again.

"Jane—"

The word turns out to be her moment of truth, the moment when the direction in which her life is heading becomes clear.

Her hand flies from her side and strikes my face. "Jane was a fucking *crackwhore* who gave ten-dollar blow jobs," she hisses. "*My* name's Veronica. *Veronica.* That's who I *am.*"

No. That's not who you are. Not anymore.

She snickers. "I bet Finch is doing them right now." Her hand

creeps up my thigh and traces the old bullet wound.

I rub my stinging jaw and recall her past life as Veronica Tse, that angel with the Modigliani eyes.

No. You're not Veronica. You never were.

GOING TO GET IT RIGHT THIS TIME. GOING TO BREAK OUT OF THE CYCLE OF revenge and regret, debt and payment.

The motel on the city outskirts isn't as ritzy as the place Lintel booked for its shindig, but the room is still larger and cleaner than my apartment. Jane drops her duffel bag, stretches, and stifles a yawn.

Step two of her plan: lying low for a few weeks. Newspapers have reported the sudden deaths of Edmund Tse's fiancée and her son. Many mention that the drive-by shooting is the second personal tragedy to hit Edmund this year. The last thing we need is headlines screaming, *Whatever happened to Veronica Tse?*

Knowing Edmund, he's probably too vain to believe that a junkie ex-hooker is behind Mina and Eddie's deaths. But even if he does suspect Jane, he can't prove anything. Finch would've seen to that. And anyway, even if he were to send the cops after us, it would mean admitting that Veronica had never been in Switzerland like he'd claimed.

"Y'know, I'm glad we're taking this road trip," Jane murmurs, crawling into bed. "It'll be nice to get away from everything for a bit, spend some time together. So glad."

Her eyelids shudder and close.

"Jane?"

No answer save for soft, even breathing. I watch her sleep for a few minutes. She's so beautiful. So peaceful.

I take the need out of my jacket pocket, flick off the cap, and jab the point into her left arm.

Her eyes fly open. Her face twists with malice. She bears no resemblance to the women she's been. She looks like Edmund more than Jane or Veronica—a monster who would steal the lives of innocents without a second thought.

She snarls, "I knew I couldn't trust…"

The moment of truth: twice I've betrayed her.

"...you … unh … ah … *ah* …"

Her body jackknifes on the bed. I roll her over onto her stomach and scoop out her tongue. "Let's hope we get it right this time," I say in her ear. My lips touch her face, her neck, once—twice—and then

I tear myself away.

I lock the door behind me even though I desperately want to know if she'll make it. But it's better that I don't. I have to avoid the temptation of finding her. I'll only screw up her life again.

Karma junkies are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, after all.

Back at my apartment, I flush bags of white powder down the toilet. I sterilize needs and syringes, wrap them in newspaper, and chuck them down the garbage chute.

I leave the sleeping pills in the bathroom cabinet.

I scrub mildew stains and vacuum up knots of long brown hair with black roots. I open the calendar I picked up from a local college and check off a handful of course descriptions. I toss it onto the stack of art books on the bedside table, along with my last tab of karma.

I roll up my sleeve.

Going to get it right this time.

As the need pierces my skin, the door opens. For a second, I think it's Jane, that she's somehow survived the effects of karma and now she'll discover me too late as if we're Romeo and Juliet.

"Anyone home?"

It's Finch.

"Johnny," he drawls as he enters the room, his sinewy hands clutching an automatic. "I saw the light under the door. Convenient. It'll save me the trip to that motel Jane said you'd be at."

Karma, that vicious bitch of a cycle. Beautiful how it makes everything fall into place. I betrayed Veronica/Jane, and she betrays me. If I didn't know better, I'd say it has a sick sense of humor.

My kind of girl, that karma.

"Sorry, pal, but Jane made me an offer I couldn't refuse," Finch says.

I try to smile. My face shudders into a twisted mask.

"Beat you ... to ... it..." My shaking hand knocks the need off of the bed. "Ah ... ah..."

Finch advances, frowning, hands outstretched as if to help me or shoot me.

"Ah—"

Room

Catherine MacLeod

RAY MORRIS WOULDN'T DIE. HE TOOK PILLS. HE GOT creative with a razor blade. He shot himself in the head. The second time he almost got it right. He was put on life support and forgotten.

The next day no one died. Car wrecks; no fatalities. attempted murders; no success. But one came close enough to bump Ray off life support.

He was disconnected. He held on. Emergency rooms filled.

Battlefields became impassible. His doctor said, "Why won't he die?"

There was no medical explanation. The chief of staff said, "Find another one."

Scholars didn't know. Clergymen couldn't guess. Finally a psychic with a stab wound staggered in to volunteer his services. He asked for privacy while contacting the spirits, and paper to record their message.

Twenty minutes later he passed it over.

No vacancy.

The sound of wings was in her dreams, and each step felt a little easier with the passage of time…

Midnights on the Bloor Viaduct

Leah Bobet

COLD WIND CURLED AROUND EMILY'S SHOULDERS, HER fingers curled around the metal railing of the bridge, and she looked down onto the highway below. Cars flashed and shivered underneath her, tiny metal blood cells hurtling through the arteries of the city. She thought about blood cells, the barely audible pumping of the heart within her, and swung one leg over the railing.

It was almost too high to get over, and her other leg slid along in a stumbling lurch that left her barely hanging onto the frosty railing. She regained her balance in one terrifying moment and leaned back against the bridge, eyes transfixed by the flashing lights of the highway. "What does it matter?" she wondered aloud. "You're jumping anyways."

Yeah, but I want to do it on my terms. My decision. My choice.

She looked back and forth along the bridge, and nobody was coming. The cars rushing east and west across the suspended road-

way didn't stop for her, drivers not seeing her or—more likely—just not caring. Emily took a deep breath. *Goodnight world. Goodnight Mom, Dad, school, work, apartment.* A pause, a glance up: *Goodnight, moon.*

She let go of the railing.

Falling, so slowly falling, and there were no scenes flashing before her eyes, just speed and cold and her scarf fluttering in the wind above her as her stomach dropped and muttered. She waved her arms frantically, reflex kicking in, waved her legs in the body's last gasp for help.

And she rose.

Emily froze, hovering over the darkened Don Valley and eight lanes of impersonal traffic scoured out between the trees. She pushed with her feet, and spun upwards. She pushed with her left hand, and spun a slow spiral in the air. She looped and twirled, dipping through the air, hovering just above the treeline.

She came to a stop under the bridge, under the rattling subway tracks that traced their way through the city, and settled on a girder. Alarmed pigeons exploded away from her in a cloud of white feathers and disappeared into the woods below. A smile broke out on her face, one of wonder and joy and pain and fear and the certainty that this was just a dream and would be taken away soon.

"Well," Emily said in a husky voice, tracing flight plans in the air with one finger, "That just figures."

She went up to the bridge again, thought about trying again for a while. But something in her body felt lighter, felt like the wings of birds. It wouldn't work.

She went home.

Over the next few days she thought about pills, or even opening her wrists in the bathtub before the imagined pain of it made her shudder. But the sound of wings was in her dreams, and each step felt a little easier with the passage of time. She was still alone, still going through the motions of school-work-eat-sleep. The world was still gray, featureless, made of concrete and steel and everything unfeeling and uncaring. When her mother called and asked how she was doing, *how was school going, did she need anything at all?* there was still a lump in Emily's throat, one that forbade her to speak or sob or scream.

But in her dreams, she flew, and it was soft and good like her head sinking into a feather pillow at the end of a long day.

She was afraid to try again.
What if this time, she fell?

SHE SAW HIM FIRST AT WORK, A SHUFFLING, THOUGHTFUL PRESENCE WITH shoulders that shaped defeat and a robin-red scarf around his neck. He ordered the same thing three shifts running—*regular latte, whole milk*—and read the paper in the wide bay window until closing time. When she put away the desserts and changed the coffee filters, Emily could feel him watching her. He left when she mopped the floor and pulled down the blinds, never saying a word.

The girls at work who liked lipstick and gossip and didn't talk to her much looked at him, and looked at her, and she knew it but said nothing.

HE KNOCKED ON HER DOOR ON THE FIFTH DAY, ALL DARK COAT AND BLOND HAIR and sad spaniel eyes. "I saw you jump," he said. There was a familiar pain in his eyes.

She let him in the door.

She cleared a space for him on the folded-down futon and brought him a glass of water. "I can't explain it," she told him, before he had a chance to ask.

"I'm not asking you to," he replied, toying with the fringes on his scarf. "I just want to take you out for coffee."

She put on her shoes and grabbed her coat. Her robin's-egg blue scarf fluttered as they stepped out the door.

"SO." HE SIPPED HIS COFFEE. "WHY DID YOU WANT TO KILL YOURSELF?"

She felt herself wanting to flinch, and instead lifted her own chipped mug, bathing her face in steam and warmth and the oily-dark smell of black diner coffee at midnight. The formica table was slippery with condensation where the mug had rested. "I don't know."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "That's not much of a reason."

She shrugged and buried her face deeper behind a veil of hair. The old man with the brown bowler hat and the book in the other booth turned his page. The neon lights of the diner burned, reflecting pink and red and green in the windows across the street. A long silence before she realized he would wait for an answer. "I don't know."

Disappointment flickered and sparked in his eyes.

She swallowed hastily around the lump that had stolen her voice, searching for the truth, wanting to push the truth at him until he

stopped looking at her with that hurt face. "I don't belong here. I'm wrong in this world, or it's wrong for me, or something, and I guess I didn't think I had anywhere else to go."

His gaze flickered. "I don't think anyone knows what they're doing here."

Her hands tightened around the coffee mug.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to go all Choose Life on you."

She nodded, tried to keep the relief from her face.

"I just think you've been given a gift."

"You said you wouldn't get—"

He raised a hand: it was pale and strong, with long square fingers and neat-trimmed nails. Farmer's hands. "Hear me out. You didn't think you had anything to live for. Sounds like you had nothing to die for, either. But now you have something: up to you how you use it."

"I can fly," she murmured, and the cold bridge wind crept up her spine. She huddled into the battered black coat and took another sip of the burning, acrid coffee.

He pulled two dollars out of his pocket, fished them out, delicate as a heron, and laid them on the table. They rattled like the subway underneath the bridge as he slid out of the cracked plastic booth and straightened. "I think you could always fly. You just never jumped off anything high enough before."

He walked out of the diner soundlessly, like a shadow. She stared into her coffee until he was gone.

After the fifth cup of coffee started cooling in the cup, she walked east and north to the bridge and stared off the side. Traffic was quieter this late, but the city never slept and the lights still rocketed along the pavement. She couldn't look at the cars; they made her head spin and her stomach churn, the same way it had churned when she'd tried to learn to drive herself. The feeling of the wheel under her hands, the power under her feet had terrified her until she couldn't breathe. Motion sickness. She hadn't wanted to move.

The wind lifted her hair into a swirling aura, and she brushed it back harshly. The motion made her almost dizzy, and she swayed at the edge, catching herself against a sturdy steel post. Why worry about falling? She could fly. There were wings beating where her heart should be.

She started to tremble, and almost ran to solid ground.

* * *

She didn't notice the thing with the stairs until someone pointed it out: a guy who sat behind her in her Thursday morning lecture and doodled in the thin-paged history textbook, Jeremy with the spiked blond-tipped hair and a grin that looked more like bared teeth.

"Hey, Emily? Feeling bouncy?"

"Huh?" She looked up at him from the bottom of the flight of stairs. *A flight of stairs.* A stray feather tickled the inside of her chest.

"You keep jumping off the second stair. Every week." He frowned at her, the tight and insular frown of the person who's stuck their neck out too far, become socially awkward.

She looked down at her feet, black sneakers going down step by step by step, and then *jump!* onto the landing. She shivered. "I hadn't noticed."

She rounded the corner and looked down the next section of the curving stairwell, through the barred metal railings. The floor by the heavy gray door looked horribly hard, the kind that would sprain an ankle or leave week-long bruises. *A flight of stairs.*

She jumped from the second step, the third, the fourth.

Each time she landed hard, and the jolt of concrete shook her bones until they felt hollow inside.

They had coffee a few more times that winter, huddling out the pervasive cold in sweaters and out-of-the-way diners, late night coffee shops where the clubbers didn't go with wide open windows that didn't press her in. She talked about the intricacies of the French Revolution and her idiot managers and the mice in the kitchen and he listened, nodding his head through a wreath of steam.

The last time they went out, they shared a basket of fries even though she was on yet another diet, fingers weaving around each other between grease and puddles of ketchup. "So... why don't you ever talk about yourself?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"That's not much of a reason." She tried to wait him out, but he was still, infinitely patient, and the nervous fluttering of birds was still locked inside her. "Who are you, anyways? You've never told me a thing about yourself."

He plucked a broken-legged fry out of the basket with his usual delicate precision. "Maybe I'm not so important."

She wiped her fingers carefully on a napkin, staining it red all the way through. "I thought we were friends."

"We are friends. But for the wrong reasons. You stay with me because I'm safe." He spit the word out, as if it tasted bitter.

Something delicate chipped inside of her, and eggshell started to slice at her heart. "I don't pick my friends because they're—"

"You're afraid." His voice was not cold or angry; neutral, factual, hard as a bridge rail on a snowy night. "You reek of it. You're like a pigeon that's been frightened out of its nest. Keep fluttering in circles and you'll die."

She picked up her coat and left.

Winter turned into spring, and on the news they talked about Seasonal Affective Disorder and suicide rates, and how they were building a suicide prevention net on both sides of the Bloor Viaduct to keep the jumpers from jumping. The commentators scoffed at the project: the net might keep them from jumping there. They would jump onto the subway tracks and out the windows and off the buildings and from other, farther bridges. You couldn't stop someone who really wanted to die.

Emily's mother called again and again, every week or so. After another birthday came and went without celebration, twenty-one candles on a low-fat grocery store cake, her mother left a message on the machine: *I hope you don't think this means I don't trust you. It's hard for a mother to let go of her first baby girl, and I know you've always been careful, always been cautious, always been good and done what's right. You've always been responsible.*

Emily threw every pill she had out the window that night, just in case. The fury alone kept her up until dawn.

He knocked on her door twice during those months, a light and nervous staccato on wood. Both times she ignored them, curling up into a little ball on the wrought-iron bed, hiding in the pillows and keeping perfectly still. After a little while he went away, left her feeling wrung out and pale. She watched him go down the apartment steps the second time, walking heavy in his big gray coat.

When he reached the second-last step, he jumped. His robin-red scarf fluttered behind him.

Emily wrote her final exams and then walked along the bridge every day after work, watching the big metal struts erected as if by magic, jutting out into a sky that was blue and warm again. He left her messages once in a while, but she didn't return them. The feeling of

wings haunted her dreams: she woke up sweating, thinking she was airborne, terrified of being pulled out too far by a prevailing wind and swept away from home. Sometimes she woke up with her hands reaching into the distance, hunting for the invisible bars of a cage.

A week before the nets went up he called, and she let it ring. His voice sounded canned and tinny on the answering machine: *It's your last chance. The net will catch you after next week, and you'll never get enough velocity again to really matter.*

She didn't sleep that night, drank black coffee to ward off the dreams until her heart raced like a sparrow in her chest. Finally, despairingly, she pulled on the coat that was now too warm for the weather, wrapped the scarf around her neck, and locked the front door behind her.

THE STREETS WERE ALMOST EMPTY AT FOUR IN THE MORNING AND THE BRIDGE was quiet, a giant burdened with construction equipment and cordoned-off shards of steel. The great and terrible teeth stabbed up into the sky, severing the beauty of the horizon.

The railing was warm beneath her hands, still leaking the heat of the day into cooler night air. The stars winked above and below, and she slid one leg over the railing. Now or never. Now or never again.

Her scarf flipped loose and she pushed it back with one hand, careful not to overbalance again. The highway below was almost quiet, and her other leg went over easily.

Standing on the edge, nothing between her and the air and the ground, Emily started to shake. *Just like diving into deep water. Just count to three and go. Count one, two, three...*

She didn't move.

"No, no no no. I'm not gonna do this all my life, goddamnit. No," she told herself between teeth clenched tight together.

"Now, one, two, three."

And she fell.

Hair and scarf streamed behind her, wind whistled in her ears, and terror gripped every muscle. She was falling. She wasn't flying, she was falling. *I don't want to die, not now, not yet!*

Limbs flailed at air, and yet nothing slowed, nothing halted. *You can fly. You can fly. You did it before.* She flapped her arms, kicked her legs: nothing.

"I can fly, goddamnit!" she screamed into the air.

Wings exploded in her chest.

She stopped dead twenty feet above the ground.

"I can fly," she said, before she stopped shaking. "I can fly. I did it, I jumped, I can fly!"

With a scream of delight, she whirled into the air, looping and twirling like an acrobat. You couldn't stop someone who really wanted to die. You couldn't stop someone who really wanted to fly.

The sun started to rise over the jagged buildings, and the trees spread out below her like a fuzz on the landscape, the road a giant ribbon across the world. She aimed herself east, into the rising sun, up into the clouds.

She could fly. So of course, there was nowhere to go but up.

Talk-Down

Catherine MacLeod

EVERYONE HAS A GIFT. MINE IS MAKING SUGGESTIONS. IN A sideshow, I'd be a hypnotist. In a Viennese salon, I'd mesmerize.

But I'm a cop, so I talk-down, convincing jumpers not to.

Usually.

My mother says, "Don't use the gift for yourself." My partner says, "Don't get personally involved." My captain says, "Learn from your mistakes."

I learned from Caroline Mithy. Fifteen stories up, standing on the ledge, she said, "Do you understand romance?" It was an informative question. "How do you survive loving someone you can never have?"

How could I say you don't?

I ignored my mother's advice once. I loved him; I suggested we marry. I have him. He'd rather be anywhere else.

She said, "I just want him to love me."

I said, "Caroline, look at me." Her eyes were broken windows.

"Jump."

Romance can kill you. Some of us have no survival skills.

Almost everyone reacts in some manner to the way we speak in stereo, no matter how often they've heard us. Today, that's good. An amused boss forgets for the moment that he's planning on getting rid of us…

Discontinuity

Tom Sweeney

NEW JERSEY HAD ONE OF THE FIRST AUTOMOTIVE TURNPIKES in history, and now, when half the world has eRoads, northern New Jersey is stuck with ribbons of cracked asphalt. The New York Skyway ends three miles into Jersey, and from there our grid bus slogs its way west.

At least the filters work. Good thing. It's only May but already a thick blanket of greasy air rests over the squat warehouses of Great West Newark in the old Meadowlands. The stagnant taste of it smacks us as we step out of the grid bus and hurry across the oil-stained sidewalk. Right now, though, air quality is the least of our worries. If we don't get off-planet, to one of the colonies or at least to the Belt, we won't be breathing anything.

We slide our Corbies through the lock and open the steel door set into the reinforced brick wall of Mr. Reinhold's warehouse headquarters. Side by side we climb three long flights, above the shipping and storage areas, to another steel door. We use our Corbies again and

enter a wide former industrial space haphazardly converted to living and office quarters.

The out-of-proportion rooms somehow resemble a military outpost. Cement floor, walls bare except for electrical conduit and pipes carrying unknown liquid, industrial gray paint over everything. Overhead, the ceilings are too high, throwing the room further off balance and lights hang on long chains from exposed steel I-beams like an army of spiders.

The air is filtered, though, and we breathe deeply for the first time today.

Jenny sits behind her console, apparently oblivious to our entrance. She's blinking two or three times a second, so we know she's crunching numbers, raking in the loot for Mr. Reinhold. The first day he bought her, his front business doubled. Jenny once told us that he now made more from legit temp storage and trans-shipment than from smuggling and extortion. Not that he believes it.

"Hello, Guinevere," we say. She likes us to call her Guinevere, a name she claims is the original form of Jennifer. Alas for Jenny, she looks more like Arthur's horse than his queen. The Zook wasted no efforts on appearances with Jenny, that's for sure. Then again, we're no piece of work, either.

She opens her mouth to speak, but the windows begin to rattle, first softly, then pulsating violently. Another shuttle shoots upwards through the shifting iridescence of the catapult's colored magnetic bands. It gains speed rapidly and disappears into the inversion layer. Too bad we weren't on board.

"Go in now," Jenny yells over the noise. "Mr. Reinhold is waiting for you."

What the hell? We thought we were early. We knock on his door, and wait. After half a minute, we hear a bellow. "I said *Come in*, you freaks."

We look at Jenny and grimace. She says, "Just keep telling yourselves what I told you. You work for each other first. You must work for each other to work for him." She smiles and we feel better. We know we can do it.

Piece of cake.

We take a deep breath and open the door to luxury and class. Mr. Reinhold went all out for his office. His ceiling hangs low enough to touch, if you dared to try. His desk is made of real wood, his chair covered with leather. Paintings, the old fashioned kind with real paint

on some kind of cloth, hang on all the walls, and his shatterproof windows are clean. Even on the outside.

"What the hell were you two waiting for? A written invitation?"

We answer in unison. "We didn't hear you through the door, Mr. Reinhold. The catapult—"

"I thought you were supposed to be psychic." Mr. Reinhold smirks as he says this. Almost everyone reacts in some manner to the way we speak in stereo, no matter how often they've heard us. Today, that's good. An amused boss forgets for the moment that he's planning on getting rid of us.

We try to lie, try to tell him what he wants to hear and what we desperately want to say, but the compulsion to tell the truth overwhelms us. "Psychic covers a lot of territory, Mr. Reinhold. We react identically. For designer bodyguards, that's—"

"For bodyguards, you guys stink. If I'd known how rotten you were, I'd have let Manny Breen keep you. I don't know why he didn't order more than one pair made, anyway, while The Zook was still alive. You freaks were just a trial run, for God's sake." He frowns. "Just how psychic are you, anyway?"

The need to tell the truth, to prove our allegiance, almost overpowers us. We mutely recite Jenny's mantra. He'll kill us if he knows. We can't serve him if we're dead. We serve him best by lying.

Sweat runs down our faces. Our mouths hang open, but no words come out.

Mr. Reinhold shakes his head. "Never mind. Don't bust a gut. I need you today. I'm meeting with Southwest Jersey."

We look around.

"Not here, you freaks. Out at the park. Why the hell do you think I made you check it out last week? For a moron convention? Get out there now, before I show. Secure the whole damn area around that bus stop. I want it clear and clean." We nod and turn to leave, but he isn't finished. "And see that there's a space for my limo across the street. I got extra guards today. Four men in the trees with tubes and I'll bring a couple more guys with me in the limo." He looks over his shoulder. "I don't trust that paranoid bastard."

We nod again and make to leave, but don't get very far.

"And don't tell anyone about this. I don't want those New York guys getting wise before I consolidate."

This time we wait for him to say something else, but he just stares at us until we leave.

We pass through the outer office, Jenny still at her console, bottomless black eyes still staring dead ahead, eyelids blinking in unison. We wonder if Mr. Reinhold ever lets her sleep.

Fifteen minutes later, as we stand outside Mr. Reinhold's headquarters waiting for the North End grid bus, Lonnie Brown slides into view with unnatural ease for so large a man. At six and a half feet, Lonnie's tall for a freak, but unlike us or Jenny, he could pass for normal if he'd wear shades to hide his eye color and missing eyebrows. Dressed in iridescent tensors, Lonnie affects a beret to conceal his total lack of hair.

He slouches over. "Hey, chumps. I figured you'd be here. Sure you don't want a ride?"

"No." We ignore Lonnie's shifting gaze yoyo-ing between us. Like most who hear us speak in unison, he thinks he must speak to both of us.

A bass rumble, more felt than heard, spreads out from the spaceport behind us. We wait while the catapult lofts another ship into low earth orbit.

We turn and watch with longing. Each ship that leaves without us is another nail in our coffins.

The storefront cubicles resonate and we feel the vibrations in our guts. A big one, a freighter, so we feel a micron less disappointed. The scent of magnetically generated ozone drifts over us, taking us back to the day we almost got off this planet. The day we took three years' worth of every cent we scraped together and used it to bribe all the wrong people. Not likely we'll ever get that close again, not with Mr. Reinhold's getting more tired of us every day. He'll chop us soon. Then at least our souls can make it off planet. If freaks even have souls.

Lonnie looks at us, opens and closes his mouth twice before saying, "Mr. Reinhold doesn't like you guys to take the bus, you know."

"We like the bus," we say in the quiet following the noise of the catapult. "It gets the job done. It's there when you need it. It's abused and no one much likes it. It's like us. Besides, what's he going to do if we take it, kill us?"

Lonnie nods. He's one of the few of Mr. Reinhold's muscles that doesn't bait us. We blackeyes should stick together, he tells us whenever he gets the chance. Not likely. Except for sharing a birthing in The Zook's lab, we have nothing in common with Lonnie. It's hard enough watching out for ourselves, never mind anybody else.

"Yeah, well," he says finally. "You got more than Mr. Reinhold to worry about—someone else might want to do you. Tricky times with the new catapult schedules. Everyone want a piece of it. You want to watch yourselves at this meeting. Better yet, don't show up."

We look at each other. This meet is supposed to be tight. What does Lonnie know about it?

Lonnie shuts up now, as if he said too much and is embarrassed. We frown. Is Reinhold going to have us done after the meet? Lonnie's not just Mr. Reinhold's star driver, but also his all-around fixer and hottest trigger. And since when has Lonnie ever been embarrassed?

He flushes. "What're you guys looking at?" He pulls his beret down low on the left side, though we all know he has no left ear. His greatcoat slips open and we see the ballistic in an antique holster.

"A hit?"

"No," he says. A sure lie. No reason to use a ballistic except a Family hit. Why else would a bodyguard not carry a taser? Instinctively, we pat ours.

Lonnie steps back. "Don't even think about it, you mind-melded freaks. You're not as good as everyone thinks."

What can we say? He's right, and Mr. Reinhold is getting bored with a set of freaks that have no special abilities as bodyguards. Or anything else, for that matter. IQs are not additive. Evidently two brains in parallel are not even as good as one.

Lonnie pulls his greatcoat closed. His hands tremble a bit, though, and we think he is glad not to have to go against us straight, despite what he thinks of our lack of collective abilities. He may not believe in our ability but reputations, even those undeserved, die hard.

The North End grid bus glides toward us. Lonnie sucks on an artificial cheek. "Keep your mouths shut, chumps, and you'll live longer."

"No we won't," we say. "Mr. Reinhold thinks we're no good as psychic bodyguards. Unless we can get someplace where genetics have rights, we're already dead."

"You're talking the Colonies."

We nod.

"How you figure to get off-planet?"

"We don't. That's the problem."

Lonnie worried his lip with his teeth for a moment, then suddenly flashes angry. "Why do you need to get off-planet for, anyway? You were no better bodyguards for your last boss and he's dead and you're not."

We smile. "Only because Mr. Reinhold had him done in order to get his hands on us."

"Mr. Reinhold wanted you guys bad. Maybe a fish bigger than him will think the same."

The bus doors wheeze open. Lonnie calls after us, "Miss this bus and you'll live longer."

We shrug, get on the bus.

He yells at us through the closed doors. "And keep your mouths shut."

Billy is driving the bus, which is good and bad. Good because he treats us like everyone else, even when we speak. Bad in that Billy can't drive. And the roads of West Port is one place where you don't want to rely on GPS. Too many unlinked gassers running wild here, West Newark cops too busy hauling away bodies to pop tickets.

That Billy keeps his job is a testament to the power of the union and the indifference of the Port Authority.

"'Lo, Billy," we say.

He keeps his eyes on the street ahead, but nods and says, "Hello, Isaac, Michael." That's Billy. Isaac and Michael. Not Ike and Mike. Or Frick and Frack. Or worse.

Before we can get seated behind him, he slams on the brakes and swears at a gasser cutting in front of him. "God damn non-electrics. Oughta outlaw 'em."

As far as we could see, the gasser had the green light.

Billy waves the gasser to move, then accelerates just as it starts forward. "Fine, sit there all day." Horns blare as a truck slides by us on the right.

Billy swings north onto the main drag and locks the auto in. "Who was that guy yelling at you?"

"Just a friend."

"Didn't sound like a friend."

We watch the road. Traffic is merging ahead. Our light is red, and cross traffic is heavy. "Billy, shouldn't you slow down?"

Billy faces front just as the light turns green. "Naw, it's green. That's the guy you ought to warn." He nods his head to the right.

We look, and see a topless gasser speeding down Second Street. He's further from the intersection than we are, but moving faster.

"Billy, slow down!"

"I got the green. He's got to stop."

The gasser keeps coming. The driver stares straight ahead, ignor-

ing the bus. He's wearing a beret and an old greatcoat.

"Billy!"

"Gawd Damn!" Billy yanks the steering wheel so hard to the left that the bus pops off the grid. The gasser roars off down Kempton Street. Under heavy acceleration, the engine skips twice and so we know for sure that it's Lonnie. The bastard.

We coast to a stop. "Sorry, Billy," we say.

"Not your fault. You guys warned me."

"No, that guy cut us off on purpose."

"Picked a damn funny way to do it." Billy opens the doors with the kickbar and we get out. He goes to the back for the insulated pole he keeps for those times his power cable jumps the grid. In this case, though, the bus rolled too far from the grid. His pole is about a hundred feet too short to be of any use.

We could wait all day for a cab around here and it's a half mile to the next bus stop. We check the time. No way. We're going to be late for the meet. We give it our best anyway, run all the way to the stop, and almost make it. Our bus pulls out while we're still two blocks away. Mr. Reinhold will kill us now, even if he wasn't going to before.

Behind us, the catapult rumbles another ship from the spaceport up to orbit and the station. From the high pitch we know it's a pinnace. We turn and watch. Every day people leave this hole, going to better places. But not us. Not today, not ever.

We want to run away, even here on Earth. Jump to Africa or Australia. But what's the point? We'd be found eventually, and returned like lost luggage.

The thought of running off and deserting our boss nauseates us. What did The Zook do to us besides mind-merging? Jenny knows. She told us what to do to fight the geas, but it's too hard.

Our discomfort ratchets up, warning us we should be at Brooklawn Park to protect Mr. Reinhold. We start running again, dodging traffic for half a mile, watching the neighborhood improve as we move west. Out of the warehouse district, a breeze is blowing, pushing away the smog. We're able to run faster.

Cutting across the brick rubble behind the restored Ashley School, we see that we've made it. Mr. Reinhold is nowhere in sight. Maybe we'll live through the day, after all.

Provided we empty the place. Tough break here. When we scouted this stop last week, we never saw anyone this time of morning. Today there's a crowd: a bum, a middle-aged woman wearing a snappy

chrome and tensor pinstripe business suit, and some young college puke in faded retro-Levis and a worn and torn sweatshirt. The electronics half-falling out of his backpack cost more than we make in a year. He and the woman stand upwind from the scraggle-faced bum sprawled on the bench. They all gotta go. And damn fast.

The woman and man wait for the bus, standing toe to curb by the bus status sign, heads cocked as they watch for their bus to round Lund's Corner. Not today, folks.

They stand close enough to each other to show their social distance from the bum, but not so close that someone might think that they're together. The bum isn't waiting for anything, and obviously couldn't care less what the man, the woman or anybody else thinks about him.

We march, lockstep, to the bus stop. The woman and the man ignore us, but at the sight of us the homeless man fidgets. He couldn't know we're Family, but he's street-wise. He's been rousted before. As soon as we get close enough for him to see our black eyes, he sits bolt upright and gathers the overcoat and flannel shirt he had been using for blanket and pillow.

We bump the college kid in passing, hard enough to make him and the woman notice what's going on. We sit on either side of the bum, crowding him. He scrambles off the bench as fast as he can, leaving behind his pile of dirty clothing. We jump up and make like to chase him, then stop when he climbs over the four-foot stone wall between the sidewalk and the park. Both the man and woman stare at us now, uncertain how to react, but they show no signs of leaving.

Mr. Reinhold might show up any second, and this place better be empty when he does. Why the hell did he set up a meet at a bus stop, anyway? We know he's afraid of being trapped, but this takes openness several steps too far.

Super Businesswoman and Boy Wonder haven't moved, so we have to move them. Can't get too tough, though, or one of them will bring back the cops and catch the boss conducting business.

No problem. Once people get a good look at us they leave on their own. It's a gift.

The woman checks her watch, pulls her purse tighter against her body. She's ready to book it—once the man leaves she'll be quick to go. We'd rather work the man, anyway. Sometimes you threaten a woman and the scrawniest wimp will turn hero on you with warning.

So we put on our show, first watching the homeless bum run

through the trees, then turning toward the man. He clears his throat, checks the bus board, and looks around. He'd like to leave, but doesn't want to appear a coward in front of the woman. Good thing he's not one of those tough-enough Cubans that hump freight for Mr. Reinhold—they'd rather die than lose face.

Hands in our pockets, we walk toward the man. He licks his lips and looks up and down the street. We're tempted to threaten him, but experience has shown that silence is far more menacing. Almost on top of him, we continue to march, no hint of slowing down. Just before we bump into him, he backs up a quick step. We hear sharp footsteps clicking in the background, receding. The woman has left. Good.

We force the man into a second backwards step. A third and his back hits a pole. Decision time for him. He sees the woman leaving, and thinks perhaps he should escort her safely away. He scoots wide around us and runs to catch up with her. The bus stop is clear.

Piece of cake.

Just in time, too—Mr. Reinhold's long black car pulls up to the bus stop and he gets out, along with two guards we haven't seen before.

He starts in on us before he's even out of his limo. "Where the hell have you freaks been?"

We look at each other, say nothing.

"I've been circling this block so long I'm dizzy. Where the hell were you?"

His limo starts to move, and Mr. Reinhold yells at the driver. "Hey! Where the hell you think you're going?" He turns to the two guards. "Get in there and cover me from across the street."

The guards pile in and the limo starts off. Mr. Reinhold yells after it, "Park where you have a good line of fire. And watch for something going wrong. What do I—gotta tell you everything?" Lonnie isn't driving.

"Where's Lonnie?" we ask.

"He's got three guys in the trees in the park behind us. Extra protection. Been there since early this morning."

We look at each other. "Since *early* this morning?"

"This bullshit from psychics? I need this like New Jersey needs another damn catapult." His face is beet red now. "I should roast in hell for wasting Manny Breen for you two turds."

A second black limo glides to the curb, and Vito Gold gets out. Vito isn't just Trenton or even Southwest New Jersey. He's all that and

Philly to boot. We loosen the tasers in the holsters custom-built into the inside of our suit jackets.

His limo speeds off with a chirp of rubber. Vito did not bring any muscle along. Not good. Not good, at all. We step away from Mr. Reinhold, causing our geas to kick in. It's still low level, though, and we manage. Mr. Reinhold has no clue. He is busy staring at his own limo, which is hemmed in by a truck and unable to turn around. The truck sports Philly plates.

Oh boy.

Vito leads Mr. Reinhold back to the stone wall, talking in a low voice. We follow them, but make sure we stand on Vito's side, not Mr. Reinhold's. We don't consider warning the boss. If Vito set this up right, nothing we do will make much difference. We know we can't save Mr. Reinhold, and that keeps the geas low. Besides, we've both been through this before.

Down the street a horn honks twice, sharp and clear. Vito doesn't stop talking, but we see him tense up. We do the same.

A gasser accelerates up the street, blowing unfettered exhaust that screams mob. It gathers speed and momentum, wailing engine and reverberating exhaust sounding a clear warning to those who know what to listen for.

The engine skips a beat and so do our hearts. Now we know why Lonnie tried to keep us away from here. He's changing sides.

We listen to Lonnie's engine without appearing to pay attention. So does Vito. Then, without warning, he vaults over the wall. He's fast, but he's got nothing on us. We roll over the wall like gymnasts, pulling our tasers as we go and still beating him to the ground on the other side by a good half second. By the time he looks up, he sees a pair of tasers looking back. He smiles, but like a rattlesnake. Not a real smile, just the way his jaw lines up.

The geas slams us in the gut for leaving Mr. Reinhold standing on the other side of the wall, but he doesn't stand for long. Vito's men do it right, by the book. The pup-pup-pupping of an automatic rifle and quickly spaced cracks of a couple of pistols take care of tradition. The hair-raising crackle of a high energy tube makes sure the job gets done to everyone's satisfaction. everyone except Mr. Reinhold. We feel the heat right through the stone wall, smell the stench of burning flesh.

We get light-headed when the geas dissolves along with Mr. Reinhold. Can we hold it?

The car roars off, leaving the park unnaturally quiet. A second car, quieter than the first but just as fast, speeds through the park toward us. It's an electric. White, four door, a Chevy or a Ford. As anonymous as a car can be. We stand, keeping our tasers held steady.

Vito gets up and dusts himself off, holds his jacket open. "I'm unarmed. In case the cops showed." We're neither relieved nor reassured.

The white car—it turns out to be an Hitachi—skids to a stop in the grass beside us, three tasers poking out the window, ready to send us after Mr. Reinhold. A Mexican standoff. We're covered by them, Vito's covered by us. The only one not holding a gun on anyone is Vito, though he's the only one not looking worried.

He holds a hand palm out to his guys in the car and they lower their weapons about an inch. Vito stares hard at them and one by one, the muzzles disappear. He turns back to us and gives us that snake smile.

"What'll it be, boys? Die like heroes or come to work for me? You guys showed smarts in getting over the wall before me. But you're Reinhold's psychics, right? You knew what was going down. That's good. You want a job?"

If Vito is smart, he'll have us burned as soon as we put up our hardware. Who the hell would hire a pair of bodyguards that just deserted their boss? But maybe Vito's no smarter that Mr. Reinhold was. No one ever rose in the mob without having an ego the size of Staten Island. We look at each other, shrug and holster our pieces.

"We'd like to work for you, Mr. Gold." The king is dead. Long live the king.

Mr. Gold smiles and waves us into the car. It's a tight squeeze, but no one complains—we all hear the police sirens on the next block.

Mr. Gold sits in the middle, between the two of us, and can't stop fidgeting. "God damn," he says. "I just doubled my base. Not bad. Not bad at all."

He's hot with self-pleasure, his body heat pushing right through our clothes. "Head back towards the spaceport," he tells the driver. "I want to do Lonnie Brown personally."

Do Lonnie?

"Mr. Gold, why are you going to do Lonnie? Didn't he just drive the car that did Reinhold?"

Mr. Gold tightens with suspicion. "How did you know that?"

A wrenching in our guts tells us that our geas has shifted to Mr.

Gold, just like it did to Mr. Reinhold when Mr. Breen got his. We've imprinted a new boss. A boss who just asked us a question we don't want to answer.

Direct questions are the worst. The compulsion to tell the truth, to say we recognized the engine sound, is strong, as strong as self-preservation. The genetic compulsion attacks us, but we swallow the bile.

"Same way we know that Lonnie didn't put three men in the trees." Not a lie. Let Mr. Gold reach his own conclusions.

"That's right, I keep forgetting I'm dealing with psychics here. Of course you'd know that. So you know how I deal with traitors, traitors to me or anyone else."

For some reason, this bothers us. None of our business if Lonnie gets it. Though he did try to warn us off, even bumped the bus off the grid. Hell, he did warn us. He gave us a heads up that we used to save our butts. We got to help him now.

Maybe Lonnie's right. Maybe we black-eyes *do* have to stick together. We'd be dead if he hadn't taken a chance to warn us. He'll be dead if we don't take the same chance.

And all we have to do is break our geas and lie to our boss.

We double up at the sudden twisting in our guts, at the reaction we get from even thinking about lying to our boss. If we try to help Lonnie, we'll puke. But damn, he's a freak like us. Who'll watch out for blackeyes if we don't watch out for ourselves?

We start to say something to Mr. Gold and stop, frozen with the sudden fear that for the first time in our existence our continuity might break, that for once we aren't about to mouth identical words.

We can break the geas programming. Jenny's told us we could. But what if we both don't break it? What if one of us breaks out and the other is still under the geas? What if we don't speak in unison? That's our trademark.

If we don't speak as one, Mr. Gold won't believe we're psychic and we're dead. That's what.

Our breathing gets faster, we're hyperventilating. Our brains run ungoverned. What if *I* say Lonnie's OK and *he* doesn't? The thought of thinking *I* instead of *we* almost causes us to pass out. Or does it affect both of us? With Vito sitting between us, we can't exchange a look. How could we signal anyway?

Time stops while *I/we* sort out to whom *I/we* am/are loyal. Screw it. We three freaks will live together or die together. Four freaks. Jenny.

Our Guinevere. What if she gets caught in the purge when Mr. Gold's goons go through West Newark?

I have to say it whether *he* does or not.

"Lonnie is as loyal as they come, Mr. Gold," we say together, speaking quickly to get it out before we collapse. "Mr. Reinhold did things that Family ought never do. Lonnie couldn't serve Mr. Reinhold and keep his honor both. He would never betray you. Trust us on that. We know." We've spoken together. Our relief is so palpable that Mr. Gold must smell it.

He doesn't. "I don't understand that, not a damn bit of it. I ought to freeze him right on the spot. But hell, what's the point of having psychic bodyguards if you don't listen to them, eh? You guys ought to know."

We take off through the park and out the Daniel Street gate. In a minute we're lost in traffic. Mr. Gold explains to us the rules of bosses and bodyguards, how one dies so the other can live, but we don't need to know. We have different ideas about that, anyway, about who dies and who gets to live. We've already outlived two bosses, and with any luck will still be around when Mr. Gold gets his. Our geas barely burbles and we smile.

Ahead of us, a passenger shuttle shoots skyward through the magnetic loops of the catapult. We aren't on that one, and won't be on the next one, either. But soon. We feel it. Lonnie will know who to bribe, and Guinevere can skim what cash we need. The four of us on one of the Colonies—and all we have to do is keep everyone thinking that we're psychic for another couple of months.

Piece of cake.

Shape-Shifter

Catherine MacLeod

SHE KNEW THERE WERE NO GHOSTS WAITING ON THE FULL moon. No one believed in shape-shifters anymore, but the stories persisted.

So did she.

Before the plastic surgery, with the face and body of a rat, she'd been comfortable in the dark, invisible, safe. And now, sculpted and stitched into splendor, she still craved darkness. The transformation was so slow she could feel her bones lengthening, skin tightening. so tender sunlight burned.

The air was cool with rain. Without thinking she dropped on all fours and buried her face in the wet grass. She wept with pain, her voice tired, a soft howl.

When the surgeries were done she could show herself without fear, but she thought she'd always feel safest at night. There were no banshees, no animals waiting to assume human form. No one believed in shape-shifters anymore.

"You must carve two figurines, as identical as possible. Do not show anyone the second statuette. No one should even know it exists…

Alabaster

Melissa Hardy

THE PAST CLINGS TO THE CITY OF VOLTERRA LIKE MOSS, enveloping it, shrouding it. Like moss it is alive. Symbiotic. Subtly corrosive. It feeds upon the walls of this ancient city, sucking its sustenance from it at the same time as it binds it all together. Like mortar, the past locks into place the stones of yellowish-gray panchino, studded with sea shells: once the Tyrrhenian Sea was not so far from the old city as it is today.

The past in question is of the most ancient sort: Etruscan. Older, even, than that of Rome. For before the rise of that *nouveau* tribe, Velathri, as it was then called, held sway over this highland, one of twelve cities, the Dodecapolis, that came together to form Etruria. Riding high on its windswept, crumbling bluffs, it stood wary sentinel over the surrounding hills then as now.

It is a city that never quite wakes from fitful sleep. Gaunt in its somber medieval garb, it is frequented only by a handful of cognoscenti: German academics engaged in the study of third-century

BC Etruscan cinerary urns or wealthy seekers after the alabaster *objets d'art* for which the city has, since antiquity, been a center of production…

Yet it must be borne in mind that the bones of Volterra are those of the Etruscan city, its cellars and its roots, the dark, still beating heart buried deep inside those yellow, treacherous cliffs called Le Balze on which the city so uneasily perches.

And who can say what those Etruscans were like, who left no written records, but only an abundance of funerary art in which the dead are depicted with enigmatic, soft smiles?

Leonora Belisola was diagnosed with consumption in the spring of the year following her confirmation. She was thirteen. At first her illness manifested itself as little more than an annoying bark, coupled with a species of *ennui*—a lethargy that left her pale and restless. Over the next eighteen months, however, she developed a persistent sore throat which made swallowing so painful that it hurt to eat; she lost half a stone and could barely speak above a whisper.

When she began to run a constant, though low-grade fever and to awaken at three in the morning drenched by night sweats, her family physician recommended a rest cure in the Alps at a well-known and expensive sanatorium. So, in June of her fifteenth year, the Belisolas' chauffeur drove Leonora, her mother, a maid, two lapdogs and twenty-three pieces of luggage from the remote and isolated Tuscan city of Volterra where they lived to the Stazione di Santa Maria Novella in Florence and loaded them all onto a train bound for the Gran Paradiso and points north. As luck would have it, a case was being tried in the courts that day; Leonora's father, Capitano Belisola, the chief of police for the City of Volterra, had been called to testify. He was for that reason unable to accompany his wife and only child so far as Florence, a circumstance which vexed and saddened the devoted husband and doting father.

As predicted, the crisp alpine air did Leonora a world of good. As the months passed, her sore throat subsided and her appetite returned. She regained nearly all the weight she had lost. Tiny roses appeared in both of her cheeks, replacing the hectic flush with which fever had painted them. Her eyes lost their diamantine brilliance.

"I fear lest by writing these words I tempt the Fates too much," Signora Belisola wrote to her husband on Ferragosto, "but I hope to bring our darling home by the first snow, entirely restored to health!

A month previously, on a sweltering Tuesday in mid-July, the chief of police had paid a visit to the Alabastri Pallotino on the Via Orti S. Agostino—this was one of the oldest alabaster works in Volterra, dating from the early nineteenth century. He asked to speak to Maestro Bernardo Pallotino, a direct descendant of the firm's founder and its present owner, and was promptly ushered into the Maestro's presence.

"And how is your dear daughter's health?" Maestro Pallotino asked after an exchange of civil pleasantries; the two men had gone to school together and known each other all their lives.

"My wife writes that she is nearly cured," the chief of police reassured him. "She says that I will hardly know her, she has grown so plump."

"Excellent news!" declared the Maestro.

"Unfortunately, I cannot expect their return until the end of autumn," Capitano Belisola continued, "and I have grown so hungry for the sight of my little angel that I have decided to have an image carved of her in alabaster... to remind me of her in her absence."

"An excellent idea," the Maestro congratulated him, "and I have just the man for your project—our young Ugolino Savelletri. Perhaps you've heard of him ? A true artist. One in a thousand. Trust me when I tell you that in Ugolino's hands, your daughter's image shall be perfectly rendered!"

Opening the double doors to his office, the Maestro called out to his secretary. "Stephano! Tell Master Ugolino that I must see him straight away."

Ugolino Savelletri was not from Volterra but, rather, Saline di Volterra, a nearby hamlet that owed its somewhat upstart existence to a hot brine springs dating from the latter years of Saint Leo the Third's papacy. Salt was a state monopoly; the sole industry in Saline di Volterra was the government-owned and operated salt works at which Ugolino's father worked and his father before him. Indeed, with the exception of the mumbling priest and the potbellied owner of the fly-speckled bar, all of the men in Saline di Volterra were employees of the salt works. This had been the case for as long as anyone could remember.

However, Ugolino's mother, Signora Savelletri, did not want such hot, hard work for her youngest child. For her other sons, big Sandro and burly Peppe, she didn't mind; they were men like their father,

born without nerve endings. But Ugolino was a delicate child, short, small-boned and big-eared.

So, over a period of seven years, she hoarded her egg money and, on the day Ugolino turned fifteen, she dressed him in his Sunday clothes and together they walked the nine kilometri to Volterra, where she purchased an apprenticeship for him with the firm of Alabastrai Pallotino.

"SIGNOR, IT WOULD BE AN HONOR TO UNDERTAKE YOUR COMMISSION," Ugolino assured the chief of police.

"Here is a daguerreotype ... for the resemblance." Capitano Belisola removed a small case of red Morocco leather, stamped with gold, from his breast pocket and handed it to Ugolino. "It was taken just before she left for her cure."

With the two older men looking on, Ugolino undid the case's clasp and opened it to behold the stiffly frozen image of a young girl so pale that she seemed to glow against the black backdrop used by the photographer. In one nearly transparent hand she clutched an Easter lily; her dark eyes glittered with fever. Ugolino stared at the daguerreotype, his heart suddenly squeezed into his throat: a most exquisite creature, he marveled.

"Well?" the chief of police asked. "What do you think?"

"An ... an admirable subject!" Ugolino stammered, dry-mouthed.

"A pretty girl, eh?" Maestro Bernardo commented, peering over Ugolino's shoulder at the daguerreotype.

"Now, I don't want anything cinerary. Nothing funerary!" the Captain instructed Ugolino. "After all, she is not going to die."

"Of course not!" Maestro Bernardo clapped his old friend on the back. "She will live a long life and give you many grandchildren. Just see if I am not right. And now what do you say to a grappa for the two of us? We shall drink to your daughter's health."

Realizing that he was being dismissed, Ugolino closed the case and, slipping it into his pocket, backed out of the office quietly, closing the big double doors behind him.

"*ALABASTRAI SI NASCE, ALABASTRAI SI MUORE.*" THIS WAS THE MOTTO OF THE Alabastrai Pallotino: "Alabaster craftsmen we were born, alabaster craftsmen we shall die."

Ugolino Savelletri loved the life that his mother had bought for him—the high-ceilinged studio with its white-washed stucco walls and

the wide, thrown-open windows that filled the big room with light; the rough wooden tables, draped in heavy canvas (which, in turn, was covered in a shimmering mantel of glittering dust) at which he and his fellow artisans sat, surrounded by rasps, files, chisels and mallets, ruminating over blocks of milky and streaked gypsum in various stages of metamorphosis with the concentrated yet abstracted air of old men playing chess in the piazza; the silky luminosity of this tender, ancient stone upon which all their best efforts were expended, which yielded as willingly to their craft as lovers do to a lover's touch.

He loved the fact that his income no longer obliged him to live in his father's crowded, riotous house in Saline di Volterra, but rather in a commodious room overlooking the little courtyard of the fifteenth-century Monasterio Sant'Andrea, which teetered on a crumbling bluff just outside the old Etruscan gate of Porta all'Arco and the ancient walls of the city, a mere seven-minute walk from the Alabastrai—the monks of Sant'Andrea, having fallen on hard times several centuries before, had taken to renting out rooms to bachelors with steady paychecks as well as occasional school parties from neighboring Tuscany.

Nevertheless, Ugolino was not a happy man. This was because he was lonely for a woman and, to complicate matters, he had fallen in love with the consumptive daughter of the chief of police upon first seeing her image.

The day following Captain Belisola's visit to the Alabastrai Pallotino, after a sleepless, troubled night, Ugolino himself paid a visit: to a woman known only as La Strega, "The Witch"—if she had ever had a Christian name, no one now remembered it, nor did she lay claim to any family in the region. A fellow artisan in the Firm, Matteo, with whom he had apprenticed a decade previously, had recommended her services to him without knowing the specifics of his situation (Ugolino had said merely that he was lonely for a woman but had not named the object of his affection): "La Strega is as old as the Colline Metallifere," Matteo had advised him, "and as wise as the Devil Himself." This was not the first time Ugolino had heard of the witch; for many, many years the favorite whore of a score of prominent Volterrans, rich, powerful businessmen and politicians and doctors, La Strega was a public institution in Volterra. Later, when her ripe looks began to coarsen and her waistline grew synonymous with her hips, she announced a change in career: in the future, she would give

herself completely over to the darker arts.

"From whore to witch… Really, it's a natural progression," she explained to Ugolino in a warm, whiskey voice as she moved around the small, dark room, lighting candles. Her flat was located above a macelleria on the little viale which ran between the Porta Marcoli and the Via Don Minzoni—a butcher's shop. It smelled of new blood and of old. La Strega reminded Ugolino of a restless wind blowing about the room; her shadow splayed large against the uneven pitted walls, while her green hair, when she turned to him, the candles all lit, wafted from her head, as tangled as seaweed. "Over the years men have filled me with their seed. I am up to here with it! All that juice," she ruminated, then, " And, of course you men would not know it, but there is an art to not getting pregnant, to not staying pregnant when you do… I could have been a mother many times over. Yet I never bore a single child. I cannot tell you how that happened, for it is a secret that only women may know, but should you have a sister who found herself in trouble, Ugolino Savelletri, I would sell her that information at the going rate. No more, no less. I am, after all, a businesswoman."

"I have heard as much," Ugolino assured her hastily, disconcerted, not knowing where to begin. "You see," he blurted out, "it's like this: I have always been lonely. I am, as you can see, rather short in stature…"

"As I understand it, you are a master craftsman," La Strega interrupted him, " at a renowned firm. Since when did these things not add up to an inch or two?"

"The truth is: I am very particular, " Ugolino explained. "Those cowlike girls who would have me for my wage and my position… I am not interested in such girls."

La Strega shrugged. "Whose problem is that?" she asked.

"You don't understand," Ugolino broke in. "It goes beyond this girl or that. I am in love with a girl who can never love me. She is the one I must have and (this is the source of my great unhappiness) I cannot have her."

"Who is she?" La Strega demanded, impatient with this dwarf. "And why can't you have her?"

"She is Leonora Belisola, the daughter of the chief of police himself,"Ugolino confessed. "Here is a daguerreotype of her."

"She must think something of you to give you her picture," La Strega commented, taking the case that he drew from his pocket.

Opening it, she held it close to her face, for she was a little nearsighted."Consumption," she pronounced after a moment's scrutiny.

Ugolino nodded, amazed at the witch's terrible perspicacity. "She is in a sanatorium now," he confirmed her diagnosis. "In the Alps. Her mother writes that she is nearly recovered; that she will be home soon. But you're mistaken about her giving me the daguerreotype. The chief of police himself gave it to me so that I might carve an image of her. To remind him of her."

"But you have seen the girl?" La Strega asked.

Ugolino shook his head. "Never," he told the witch. "Notwithstanding this, I am in love with her and have been so since I first laid eyes upon her."

"And when was that?" the witch asked.

"Yesterday," replied Ugolino.

"That long?" La Strega asked dryly. "Well, so, shall I tell you what to do then to have her always with you?"

"Please!" Ugolino urged her. "You mean, you can do that?"

"Of course," La Strega replied disdainfully. "First the money."

Carefully Ugolino counted out the lire notes. Two months' wages in full plus some. As Matteo had explained to him, spells did not come cheap.

"You must carve two figurines, as identical as possible," said La Strega. "Make one out of the finest *agata* alabaster you can find and the second from the purest and most translucent *scaglione* you can lay your hands on. That is what you must do, young Maestro; I will do the rest. Uh-uh!" She held up a warning finger. "What that 'rest' is, do not ask, for I will not tell you. But one thing I will tell you: do not show anyone the second statuette. No one should know even that it exists. Not your mother. Not your priest. Not your best friend. As for the first, the *agata*, present that to the chief of police in fulfillment of your commission. He would not want the *scaglione* in any case. It will too closely resemble a ghost, and this would disturb him, given his daughter's precarious health. "

"But why must I not show the *scaglione* to anyone?" Ugolino asked.

"Why?" La Strega repeated. She leaned closer; hissed in his ear. "Because it is a secret. A terrible secret. "

Ugolino recoiled in horror. "But... why, La Strega? Why terrible?" he faltered.

"You have set wheels in motion tonight," La Strega advised him briskly as she jammed the bundle of lire into the tight bodice of her

low-cut dress. "Now you must go where the dark carriage takes you!"

The next day Ugolino instructed the firm's driver to take him to the mine at Castellina Maritima, where he personally selected the two blocks of alabaster required for the task set him by La Strega. Indeed, he deliberated over the stones so long that the quarry master grew first bored with the young artisan, then exasperated, and the driver drank enough grappa at the local bar to render himself comatose: when Ugolino finally emerged from the quarry office with two nearly perfect blocks of stone—a translucent honey-colored *agata* and a *scaglione* so pure that it looked like congealed cloud—he found the old man curled up in the back of the cart, sound asleep, and as incapable of resurrection as a sack of potatoes. He therefore climbed into the driver's seat, and taking the reins, directed the big dray horse towards Volterra.

At the same time as Ugolino was guiding the cart over the rutted, pitted road leading from the mine, far away and high up in the snow-capped Alps to the north, Leonora Belisola, playing at skittles with friends, was overtaken with a sudden dizziness and borne, swooning, to her room where the nurse in charge took her temperature.

"It is somewhat elevated. Curious... but nothing to worry about," the nurse hastened to reassure Leonora's alarmed mother. "She's just overdone it a bit. It will be back to normal by morning."

That evening, when everyone else had left for the day (as Leonora lay in her white, high bed, woozy with fever), Ugolino sat down at his big table at the studio with a sketch pad and a box of charcoals in front of him. The dusty, bumpy drive to and from the quarry had tired him, but he was too eager to begin to wait until morning. Taking the case from his pocket, he opened it and propped it in front of him so that he could see the daguerreotype. He began to draw.

Several hours and many sketches later he had his template. He had depicted Leonora much the way the daguerreotype had, with modifications to make her pose more easily rendered in stone: an attenuated female figure languidly seated on a kind of pediment. Her left arm extended behind her in such a way as to thrust her chest slightly forward, her weight apparently supported by her left hand, palm down on the pediment. Her knees tumbled together towards the left as well, their outline just discernable through drapery folds, her slip-

pered feet crossed at the ankle. Her torso and head twisted towards the right. In her right hand, she held a lily tight to her breast.

Ugolino put away his charcoals, crushed the half dozen discarded sketches into the waste basket and arranged his stone-carving tools in a semi-circle before him: wood rasps in different lengths, riffler rasps, a cabinet rasp and a round rasp, goudges, bull-noses, miter tools and calipers for measuring, a single-cut file, a hacksaw for cutting stone, a hand drill, a point chisel for roughing out the stone, a tooth chisel for shaping and modeling the form and a flat chisel for finished surfaces and details. Then he set the block of agate-colored alabaster he had that day purchased on the table. Picking up the largest of his wood rasps, he squinted at the stone before beginning to file it down to base stone. He would carve the *agata* first. That way he could correct any design flaws when he came to the *scaglione.* The rasp made a grating noise as it screeched across the a*gata's* rough surface and the clock in the Palazzo dei Priori struck midnight.

Leonora's fever did not subside overnight. Indeed, it rose a degree and a half. "This is most unusual," the doctor told Signora Belisola. "I must have a listen to her chest. Mademoiselle Nurse, if you please!"

Taking Leonora's chart from the hook on the foot of her bed from which it hung and a pen from the big pocket of her white, bibbed apron, the nurse prepared to take notes. In the meantime, the physician inclined over the patient and pressed his ear to her chest. "Astonishing!" he murmured after a moment.

"Why? What do you hear?" Signora Belisola demanded, wringing her handkerchief, beside herself.

"*Râles*!" the doctor explained. "An extraordinary series of them! Nurse! Write this down!" Then, as the nurse busily scribbled, "They range from ... ah, yes! A dry sonorous rattle like the bass note of a wooden instrument to a... Let me see.... Moist sound like the cooing of a dove to a ... metallic tinkling like that of a small bell which has just stopped ringing to a ... a gnat buzzing away inside a porcelain vase!"

"But what does it mean?" Signora Belisola cried, distraught.

"Madame," said the doctor, straightening up and adjusting his coat and cravat, "I'm afraid your daughter will have to remain with us for some time longer. Apparently, her tuberculosis has mysteriously returned."

* * *

At the same time as the nurse was bearing the chief's wife off to her own room, swooning over the doctor's unhappy announcement, Ugolino, his tongue thrust firmly into one cheek, his head cocked, carefully etched a spine line on the block of agate to assist him in maintaining the image's symmetry as he carved. This accomplished, he painstakingly copied the template onto the base stone with a stick of charcoal, often resorting to his calipers to ensure that the image translated from two to three dimensions as precisely as possible.

"You are taking some care with that sculpture," his friend Matteo observed, for Ugolino rarely bothered to take what was for most artisans the necessary step of manually transferring a template to a stone—his hand to eye coordination was so precise that he could carve freestyle. "Is this a labor of love?" Matteo teased him slyly.

Despite himself, Ugolino flushed. "Every piece I make is a labor of love," he replied, bending low over the stone so that Matteo might not glimpse his momentary discomfiture. "Besides, on what should I lavish my poor heart's affection, if not this stone and others?" he joked roughly, hoping, by this means, to throw his friend off the scent. He had never told Matteo of his infatuation with Leonora; nevertheless he worried that his expression or demeanor might give his secret away, for the sick girl so dominated his thoughts that he feared that anyone looking at him could read in his countenance the fact that he loved and whom. He remembered La Strega's dark injunction: *No one should know even that it exists. Not your mother. Not your priest. Not your best friend.*

"As you know, Matteo," Ugolino continued, "if ever a woman looks on me, her heart turns to stone."

"You think too little of yourself, Ugo," Matteo warned him.

"I am too little to think of," Ugolino quipped in reply.

Throwing his hands up in the air, Matteo acknowledged defeat. "I give up," he said. "Your wit is sharper than mine." Clapping Ugolino on the back, he returned to the chess set he was carving for the bishop out of a fine Gabbro Rosso Volterrano. It was the color of dried blood.

"I have never seen anything like it!" the doctor told Signora Belisola. "Such a sudden relapse and so dramatic. One moment she was fine and the next... practically *in extremis*. There is no time to be lost. We must attack the disease with all the weapons in our arsenal." He turned to the nurse. "Nurse, put Mademoiselle Belisola on a

diet of raw eggs, koumiss, beef juice, iron and steel wine and dose her regularly with cod-liver oil, slippery elm infusions and whiskey. It is Tuesday," he continued. "Excellent! She shall accompany the others to the abattoir." He turned to Signora Belisola and bowed shortly. " Madame, if you wish, you may go along. You might find the experience ... efficacious."

Two hours later, Leonora was bundled up in coats and throws, carried to the car, and driven with a half a dozen other acute cases from the sanatorium's lofty peak down a series of steep, hairpin turns to an abattoir that lay on the outskirts of the little hamlet nestled in the valley below. An obsequious attendant wearing a blood-splattered canvas apron ushered them through the abattoir's offices and onto the straw-covered killing floor, which so reeked from blood and entrails that the invalids were obliged to cover their noses and mouths with their handkerchiefs and pinch their nostrils shut to keep out the musty, liverish odor. Off to one side stood a little table with bowed, gilded legs, somewhat battered now, but once suitable for a drawing room. On it was placed a silver tray which held a half a dozen crystal water goblets and a crystal pitcher.

After arranging the patients off to one side, the attendant called out to the brawny, younger man who was his assistant, "Bring her in, Marcel!" Marcel left the room to return a moment later leading a small cow, sweet-eyed and white with brown spots. He handed the halter reins to the attendant and, picking up a sledge hammer, raised it above his head, the big muscles in his arms bulging, and brought it down with a sickening thud on the cow's head. The cow stumbled forward, but before she could fall to her knees, the attendant had eased a scythe-sharp silver knife across her throat, cutting her jugular vein. Seizing the crystal pitcher by its handle, he held it under the bright arch of blood at such an angle that it was filled within moments. Then he let the cow fall to the floor and handed the pitcher to his assistant who proceeded to fill the goblets from it and hand one to each of the consumptives.

When he handed Leonora her goblet, he smiled with tangled teeth. "*Salute*!" he exclaimed shyly.

Leonora's thin fingers closed tremblingly around the goblet's stem. With her free hand, she tugged at the nurse's sleeve. "Can someone look after Mama?" she whispered, hoarse from coughing, and pointed to the straw-strewn floor where Signora Belisola lay crumpled in a dead faint.

* * *

As the worsening Leonora was made to recline in an airtight chamber from which some air had been removed to create a partial vacuum, Ugolino began the laborious task of roughing her shape out with his chisel.

As she was compelled to inhale first creosote, then carbolic acid, then chloroform, followed by iodine gas, hemlock extract and turpentine, he started to work the roughed-out image free of the base stone.

As the nurse brushed a glass electrode connected to a battery over Leonora's frail body, administering to afflicted areas a series of static shocks, Ugolino used a hand drill to punch a dozen holes here, where the figurine's legs were distinct from the pediment on which she perched, to so weaken the alabaster that he could easily wheedle it free with his mallet and chisel.

"Never have I encountered a patient so resistant to treatment. Your daughter is a phenomenon, Madame!" the doctor told Signora Belisola, his ear pressed tightly to Leonora's sunken chest. "Boiling water… leather creaking on leather… In the past two days alone she has expectorated more than half her body weight in sputum. There is no help for it. We must perform a pneumathorax and we must do it tonight. "

A few moments before midnight, Ugolino, working late in his room in the monastery, sanded the last of the file marks from the two figurines with a square of coarse sandpaper and rinsed them carefully with water. Opening the big window that overlooked the courtyard, he set them on the wide sill to dry in the faint breeze that blew up from the enclosed garden—the breeze was scented warmly with rosemary and thyme. He took a couple of steps backwards and, chin in hand, surveyed his handiwork, first from this angle, then that. There was no doubt about it: the two statuettes were virtual replicas of one another and so closely resembled their prototype that no one who had ever seen Leonora Belisola in person could fail to identify the model. They were unquestionably Ugolino's finest work to date, the most perfectly executed and the most evocative.

"*Bellissima!*" he breathed.

At that precise moment, Leonora's doctor turned to the nurse and said, "Bistory, please!" whereupon the nurse handed him the gleaming, somewhat curved knife of that name. "First we drain off the pus," he advised her, carefully inserting the knife into Leonora's shallow chest, replacing it a moment later with a catheter, which drained into

a shallow steel bowl. Twenty minutes before, the nurse had injected the girl with a powerful morphine solution. Leonora floated, aware of light and sound, indeed dazzled by these things and wrapped in a delicious, velvety warmth; her present predicament did not concern her. "Now to collapse the lung!" the doctor declared. He filled a large syringe with nitrogen and was just sliding the needle between her ribs and upwards, aiming for the diseased lung, when the needle's tip hit a piece of rib and broke off.

"*Mon Dieu*!" the doctor swore softly. Seizing the knife from the nurse, he started to dig between the girl's ribs in an effort to retrieve the broken-off needle. His efforts became more frenzied as the moments dragged by until he accidentally punctured a pulmonary vein. This in turn produced an air embolism, which sent Leonora, still unconcerned, off into violent convulsions. A moment later, she lay dead on the operating table.

In Volterra, the clock in the Palazzo dei Priori tolled all the twelve hours adding up to midnight to the cluster of medieval facades which crowded about the silent and deserted square as if for warmth. Ugolino could hear the clock strike from his room in the monastery, a quarter of a mile away. The sound was muffled, doleful. He heard something else as well, but more clearly, from closer by: the sound of a carriage's wheels grind against cobblestones as they turned outside the gates of San Antonio's and rumbled away towards the Via dei Sarti and the house of the chief of police.

At just past ten the following morning, Ugolino delivered the *agata* statuette, wrapped carefully in paper, to the well appointed home of the chief of police, which was located near the Pinoteca and the Teatro Romano. The young artisan was very proud of his fine work and wanted to give it to the great man himself—to see the expression on his face and to hear with his own ears praise for his undoubted achievement.

However, a servant took the bundle from him at the door, whispering, "Many pardons, sir, but the *capitano* cannot see anyone at present. He has just received a telegram from his wife. Their beloved daughter passed away last night at the very stroke of midnight and the master is ... well ... distraught."

At first, Ugolino, realizing that his love for Leonora had been her undoing, thought of hurling the *scaglione* figurine remaining in

his possession from Le Balze, which would cause it to shatter into dust. However, he found himself incapable of parting with the little statuette and, instead, kept it locked up in his room at Sant'Andrea, as La Strega had instructed him to. No one ventured into this cell but the cleaning woman and she believed the statuette to be a rather odd representation of the Virgin. Occasionally she would dust it or, picking it up, spit on it, and rub it vigorously with her rag.

One night nearly two months after Leonora's untimely death, Ugolino was seated at his little table in his room at the monastery, contemplating the *scaglione* figurine by candlelight. Outside a thunderstorm raged. The eye of the storm seemed to be directly overhead: not a heartbeat intervened between the clap of thunder and the lightning that followed directly in its wake. Nevertheless Ugolino's window to the garden stood open; the rain blew in. He had grown careless in his grief; over the weeks and days since the dark carriage had rolled down the narrow streets of Volterra at his bidding, his heart had become so heavy, so sodden with despair, that it served to anchor him in one spot. He moved only reluctantly, with great difficulty, as though dragging within him an immense stone.

He gazed into the candle's yellow flame. Warm as fire? How about as cold as ice? he thought, letting his callused finger drift slowly over the statuette, tracing its curves, the folds of drapery. Alabaster is mortal, ultimately, as we ourselves are, in the sense that it, like we, will ultimately degenerate. Just more slowly. A blurring of lines, followed by ultimate erosion. Yes, an alabaster object will outlive its creator by at least four generations, rather like a dog will live seven years to our one, but after that...

Or is it a stone at all, he wondered, cocking his head to one side. Perhaps instead it is petrified light.

The next moment, a bolt of lightning struck an apricot tree in the garden below, riving the trunk in twain and setting all its leaves and clustered fruit on bright fire.

The following moment, a second bolt blasted through the window, like an arrow of blue fire shot directly towards him. Startled, Ugolino jerked backwards in the instant before the lightning struck, causing the back legs of his chair to catch in the seam between the tiles of the floor. and his chair to topple over backwards. He struck his head hard against the cold floor and, for a few minutes, lay unconscious as, in the courtyard below, the apricot tree sizzled and then sputtered in the heavy rain.

When he regained consciousness, he sat slowly up, rubbing the back of his head with the palm of his hand, groggy and confused. After a few moments, he stood gingerly, using the toppled-over chair and table to help pull himself up. Every bone in his body ached and he was dizzy to the point of nausea from the blow to his head. A dark cloud of steam boiled up through the window, stinking of sulfur, causing his eyes to burn and further unsettling his stomach.

Nothing, however, was more unsettling than the sight that met his eyes when he lowered them from the window to his little table. There, at the end of a trough of char gouged out of the table's oaken surface by the lightning bolt, stood the *scaglione*, emitting a glow very like the radiance shed by the moon on a clear night untainted by cloud. More startling still was when the little statue bestirred herself, shifting on her pedestal, and, as Ugolino first rubbed his eyes in disbelief and then stared at her, gaping, spoke in so small a voice that he could barely separate it from the sounds of wind and rain.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what am I doing here?" ✤

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Underground

Catherine MacLeod

GOOD GRAVE ROBBERS ARE HARD TO FIND, AND MINE KNOW I'm crazy to want this done.

But crazy doesn't mean your money's not good.

I watch them raise the coffin. Hold my breath as they crowbar the lid. Kyle hasn't changed *too* much since the day he promised we'd always be together. The men eye his wedding ring, but stand back politely—or maybe just keep their distance in case I bite.

I *said* I'd go mad without him.

One of the diggers steps up, helps me into the coffin, waits until I'm comfortable among the stiffened limbs. I thought they might leave after sealing me in, but his good manners and the sound of dirt falling on the lid indicate money well-spent.

I suppose I *could* have given them our rings…

She dreaded finding out why the boy had led her here, when the other ghosts she'd seen had only led her to their graves, or their killers, or both…

The Dead Boy

Holly Phillips

SHE WAKES TO FIND A DEAD BOY STANDING AT THE END OF her bed, then realizes she's still dreaming.

She wakes. This time the dead boy is Andrew, red-haired, freckle-armed Andrew, buried by the edge of a far-off lake.

She wakes. The women, the savaged women and their shallow-eyed killer who hanged himself in his cell.

She woke for real, skin wet with nightmare sweat, but the boy was still standing there. The first boy. The dead boy she didn't know.

EMILY LAKE LIKED WORKING AT THE CARWASH. SHE FOUND IT COMFORTING. The shabby office, the inner workings of the autowash, the back side of the self-service bays where she went to empty the quarters and refill soap and wax: it all had the ignored, hidden feeling of backstage in a high school auditorium. It was the feeling that nobody knew what went on there, or cared, or ever would care unless something went dramatically wrong. Not only that, the other people who worked

there were the kind who have spent a lot of time on the back side of things. They smoked, they spat in the puddles, they snarked at one another in the mornings. Emily felt safe with them. They weren't the kind who went looking for challenges.

They weren't the kind who asked questions.

Jase looked up from the ragged towels he was folding. "Emily, you're late."

"Hey."

"Don't 'hey.' That's just rude. You're late. I had to start up the machine by myself and the towels weren't dry."

Jase was a small, chunky man with skin the color of milk chocolate and springy curls going prematurely gray. He worked with a half-smoked butt in the corner of his mouth, unlit.

"Sorry." She found her time card in the rack, punched it, dropped it back. "I'll cover if you want extra time at lunch."

"Nah, that's okay." Mollified by the offer. "It's going to be a slow day, anyhow. Everybody'll wait until after it rains."

Emily poured herself a cup of coffee, forgetting to write her initials on it until after it was full, same as every time. The coffee was oily caffeine, drinkable only with the addition of powder from a crusty jar. She stirred and drank standing in the open door. Vast stretches of concrete for the winter line-ups, the autowash in the cement block building next to the office, the self-serve bays in a row facing the street. Empty on a summer Wednesday morning, and gray as ashes under the dull sky. Rain seemed imminent, certain.

Rain on the bill of her cap as she digs for the landscaping crew, water sweet with the brief taste of freedom.

Rain on the windscreen as the cop drives, following Andrew's ghost.

The cop. How long had it been since she'd thought about Bailor? He'd busted her once for knowing too much about one murderer, then used her to find another. Would have used her forever if she hadn't run, breaking her parole.

"I hate the rain," she said to Jase.

"Summer, it's not so bad. I like the storms. It's that cold November rain I can't stand."

Last autumn's leaves under foot, the lake a mirror for gray. Andrew's ghost standing among the reeds over his grave.

The dead boy, the one she didn't know, standing in the deep shadow of the first self-service bay.

Emily drank her coffee down to the sweet, sticky sludge. "Did you

check the reservoirs in self-serve?"

"Nah. I was waiting for someone else to come, in case of customers. Bruno never showed. When you were late I thought I was on my own."

She found a pen to carve her cup with a squeaky E, then tucked it by the machine. "I'll do it. Shout if you need me."

Jase shrugged. "People'll wait till after the rain."

She walked through the first thin lines of wet with the key to the back of the bays in her hand, but when she got there the dead boy was gone.

THE BOY DIDN'T LOOK MURDERED.

There was no point asking questions, but she studied his ghost while she ate a peanut butter sandwich in the boarding house kitchen. It was late, she had the place to herself. The boy's ghost stood across the table from her, hands at his sides, an unremarkable boy. Brown hair, brown eyes, the unformed features of the under-twelve. He wore a blue sweater with shirt cuffs and collar just showing, the kind of clothes a mother might put her son in for a class photo. This struck Emily as a little odd. Even Andrew, too young to flaunt the outrage of his wounds, had come to her naked. But the motionless, expressionless stare, the voiceless yet palpable need...

"What do you—" She caught herself, stopped up her mouth with more bread and peanut butter. Stupid to ask, impossible not to. Also impossible not to sit up half the night listening for the answer that would never come. But that was all right. All she had to look forward to in bed was the dreams.

And when she finally slept, she found the dead boy didn't even have the grace to give her one of those.

SHE STUCK IT OUT AT THE CARWASH UNTIL PAYDAY.

BAILOR TURNED OUT TO BE UNEXPECTEDLY DIFFICULT TO FIND. THE OLD number she had, his private number, got her nothing but an out-of-service recording. She called police headquarters and asked for Sergeant Bailor of Major Crimes, but when she was transferred to the squad room it was a woman who answered the phone.

"Detective Toms."

"I'm looking for Bailor," Emily said.

"Sergeant Bailor's on leave," Toms said. "I've been assigned his

active caseload, if this is about something he's working on?"

Emily hesitated, her eyes unfocused on the bus station interior. "No," she said, "I'm family. His niece. I lost his number at home."

"I can't give out his home phone number," the detective said smoothly. "Why don't you give me your name and number and I'll pass it on to him?"

Emily hung up. No point checking the phone book: cops mostly had unlisted numbers. Bailor always had. But in the days before she'd decided she wasn't up to being Bailor's pet "informant," he had set her up with an email account. She found an internet café, bought an expensive bagel, a coffee, and half an hour on the net. She ignored the bagel, drank the coffee, tapped the keyboard without much hope. The keys were sticky and the screen flickered at the bottom edge, but the server's home page loaded instantly, and when she logged on to her account it was still active. There were a dozen messages, all from Bailor, the earliest almost a year old.

Wherever the hell you are, haul ass. I can only cover with your parole officer for so long.

Later ones were much the same. *What are you doing? Do you really want to go back to prison?* Then, about seven months ago, one that surprised her enough to start her hands shaking.

When you're on the job for any length of time, you get so you don't ask yourself certain questions. Could I have changed things? If I had got that witness to talk, would I have caught the perp sooner? If I had been smarter, if I had made the connections sooner, if, if.

If I had believed in your ghosts sooner, could I have kept you out of jail?

Those are the kinds of questions you can't ask if you want to do the job, and I want to do the job, so I don't ask. But listen. Don't think I don't know how much I owe you. If you need help, Emily, I swear, you only have to ask. Just goddamn call and let me know if you're okay.

She trashed the message, her eyes hot, her throat heavy with anger. She told herself it was anger. She crammed a bite of bagel into her mouth and forced it down. The next message was from four months ago. *Call me,* it said. And the next one, *Call me. It's important.* And then, *Lake. Don't make me beg. People are dying here.* And then, the last one: *Call.* Just that, one word, and a phone number.

But the number only got her a voice mail recording. She tried it twice that evening, then again in the morning after a noisy night in the youth hostel downtown. Seven rings and Bailor's grainy voice telling her to leave a message. She hung up, not wanting to give her

location to anyone who might be sharing Bailor's phone. He'd been divorced when she knew him, but a lot could happen in a year. She might have left it there, if the dead boy hadn't been standing on the sidewalk outside the hostel's glass door, watching her with that somber, bewildered look. People didn't exactly walk through him, they just walked, and he was still there, watching her. Waiting for her to do whatever it was she was supposed to do.

So she followed him, as she had followed Andrew's ghost once before. But where Andrew had led her and Bailor to a muddy grave on the lakeshore, this boy, with his neat hair and tidy clothes, led her across downtown, through the technical college's campus, and up to the front door of a stucco apartment building, where he left her standing, at a loss. Just an ordinary building on an ordinary city street. Emily cupped her hands and peered through the glass door to the lobby, but the boy's ghost wasn't there. Was this where the killer lived? She checked out the panel by the door that listed the occupants' names, and took a punch of surprise.

Bailor. 2B.

She looked around for the boy, wiping her hands on her jeans, but he was still gone. What the hell is this? she thought, and then realized she'd said it aloud. "Is this some kind of a fucking joke?"

A woman walking across the lobby from the elevator gave her an uneasy look through the glass. Emily pretended to be digging in her pocket for her keys, then caught the door as the woman came out.

The second-floor hall was empty, a long stretch of worn brown carpet and fluorescent lights, the red EXIT above the door to the stairs the only non-dingy thing in the place. It smelled of cooking, damp carpet, and cigarette smoke, new and old. So goddamn familiar she could feel every hour of every day of her fugitive life coming to rest like a flock of buzzards on her shoulders. She hated it, like she'd hated Bailor, like she'd come to hate the dead. She would have left, if the boy hadn't led her here.

No. Untrue. She dreaded finding out why the boy had led her here, when the other ghosts she'd seen had only led her to their graves, or their killers, or both. She stayed because if she left, the boy would still be waiting, and because she still had the scar on her wrist from the last time she'd tried to get away.

She knocked on the door, pounded with her fist. Eventually, the door swung open and she found herself looking up into Bailor's red face and small blue eyes.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "The hell took you so long?"

She took a deep breath, ready to yell, and smelled booze, sweat, cigarettes, vomit, and realized he was drunk, days drunk, standing only because he had his shoulder wedged against the door.

HE WANTED TO TALK. HE SAT IN A SOFT LEATHER CHAIR THAT HAD PROBABLY been a good one before the sweat, the spilled drinks, the cigarettes burning themselves to ash, and said meaningless things like "we're already behind, trail's gone cold" in a gluey, rasping voice that made her want to hit him. She ignored him instead, stepping around his chair and his feet while she gathered up microwave dinner plates, empty bottles, dirty clothes. He was, by the evidence, a vodka man. She dumped the clothes in the bedroom, which was a sour tangle she wanted no part of, and carried the rest of the crap into the kitchen, which was a sticky mess but not actually crawling. She dug out a package of garbage bags, filled the sink with soapy water. By the time the place was marginally livable, Bailor had passed out in his chair.

Emily sat on the couch and watched him sleep. A big man once, barrel-chested and heavy armed, he looked like a loosely-strung collection of bones. His face was shockingly old with the jaw sagging and hollows under the red-veined cheekbones. His mustache was ragged, his brown hair salted and dull. He was probably fifty, but he looked ten years older.

"What the hell happened?" she asked him. He didn't stir.

He'd been at the top of his career when she left, looking to make inspector before he retired. Now here he was, haunted and drunk. Emily shivered and looked away. The apartment wasn't a bad one, fair sized rooms, big windows looking down on the street. The furniture was pretty good, too, showing less wear than what was obviously his favorite chair, but there was little else, no books, no stereo, just a TV opposite the chair, cardboard boxes stacked against a wall. She got up and went over to them, then shied away. In the kitchen there were still two bottles with vodka in them, one of them unopened. She poured them down the sink, knowing by the signs that he wasn't far gone enough to have to worry about DTs. Then she found his jacket, and his wallet, from which she removed the bills.

"WHAT IS THIS?" HE SAID. "SOME KIND OF REVENGE?"

It was morning. He stood in the kitchen doorway, looking, as she told him, like shit, but she'd heard the shower running and could see

he was wearing probably the last clean shirt in the place. She turned back to the stove and the eggs she was scrambling.

"Hungry?"

He growled and leaned past her to pick up the coffee pot with a trembling hand. He poured himself a cup, sat at the kitchen table, and lit a cigarette. "The hell do you think you're doing, Lake?"

"Saving your life, probably. You dumb fuck." She slammed things around, getting eggs and toast onto a plate, then joined him at the table. "The hell do you think *you're* doing?"

He looked at her plate and turned a sickly gray. She tore off a corner of toast with her teeth, crammed in a forkful of eggs, and started to chew.

"Sure you're not hungry?" she said with her mouth full.

He got up and left the room. After a while she heard him thumping around in the bedroom; a bit after that the apartment door slammed. She tensed. *If he's gone to get another bottle...* Well, so what if he did? What was it to her? She swallowed, her throat gone tight, and stared at her plate awhile. Slowly, she began to eat. He came back soon, slamming the door again.

"The fuck did you do with my money?"

"Coffee. Food."

He glared at her, breathing heavily through his nose. She went back to her breakfast. Eventually he poured himself another coffee, lit another cigarette, and stood against the counter behind her back, smoking and sipping. She cleaned her plate with the last scrap of toast.

"Is there any coffee left?"

A pause. Then he thumped the pot on the table beside her and sat down.

"Goddamn it," he said, "where the hell have you been?"

"Hiding from you." She poured, emptying the pot. "Are you going to want more?"

HE TOLD HER ABOUT THE CASE AND SHE KNEW, EVEN WHILE HE WAS STILL talking, that he wasn't telling her everything. Not the important bits, not the bits that had started him drinking. It didn't even sound like the sort of case the precincts would hand over to Major Crimes. The regional vice-president of a bank decides to drive to an out-of-town meeting instead of flying; car gets (maybe) run off the road; brake lines (maybe) deliberately worn through; big insurance policy that

pays out for anything short of suicide.

Emily sat by the open window in the living room, watching Bailor talk and smoke, his shaking hand scattering ashes across the arm of his chair. He had the hunched shoulders and inward stare of the obsessed.

"So the precinct detectives have the case for not even a week and they decide it's a goddamn suicide."

"So why shouldn't they?"

Bailor stubbed out his butt, reached for the pack, then changed the motion to pick up his coffee mug instead. "Because the guy's wife and her whole damn family hate his guts, that's why."

Hate, Emily noted, not *hated*. "So the funeral's a happy occasion, even if they're a bit strapped for cash. So what?"

"*So*," he said nastily, "they're getting away with goddamn murder." He banged down the mug, shook a fresh cigarette out of the pack, lit up. Emily waited through several drags.

"Okay," she said finally, "I give up. Why is the case worth drinking yourself onto the transplant list?"

"I'm on a goddamn holiday."

"What is this, twenty questions? It isn't even a Major Crimes kind of case."

"Jesus. Emily the police expert. Emily the criminologist."

"How about Emily who's gonna get busted for parole violation because she came back—"

"Four months too fucking late, thank you very much."

She glared, but he wouldn't meet her eye. The ember of his cigarette was so much more interesting: the ash had to be smoothed off just right.

"Okay," she said softly. "Twenty questions. Who's the boy?"

Bailor's hand froze. Smoke twisted, shivered, settled into a strand that leaned toward Emily and the window. "You know the boy," he said just as softly. "Andrew Karsov. It's his old man that was killed. His wife blames him for the kid's death. Couldn't keep his family safe in their own house. Couldn't find him when he was gone. Couldn't even sit it out with her at home, had to go to work, had to, when they didn't know where the kid was or if he was alive or dead. Christ, she hated him. Her whole family. They came up with a new way to punish him every week. And finally they killed him. Probably they didn't even care if it looked like accident or suicide. If it's ruled an accident, they get the money. If it's ruled a suicide, they take away the last shred

of dignity the guy had left." Bailor stared at his cigarette a moment, then ground it out in the crowded ashtray. "But it was murder."

Emily thought you'd have to go far to find a more likely candidate for suicide, but she let it go. "There's something else. There has to be."

"You can read the file in the car. I figure the place to start is the cemetery where—"

"Bailor, will you listen? I've been seeing a ghost, a boy's ghost, and it isn't Andrew Karsov."

Bailor stared at her, and she had the sense that his mind was shifting gears, rustily grinding its way out of the rut it had been in for months. He said blankly, "What boy? There is no boy."

"Yes," she said between her teeth, "there is. Why do you think I'm here?"

"I don't know. I thought you finally got my message." He still stared. "Jesus. Was it Fortune? Another one of Fortune's victims?" Fortune was the man who'd abducted and killed Andrew Karsov. "We never found any other bodies and we had half the damn lakeshore dug up."

"I don't know. I don't think so. He's different."

"Different how?"

"He…" She groped for words, but had to give up on the intangibles. "He has clothes on. He doesn't give me nightmares."

Bailor visibly lost interest. "Well, there's no other boy in the Karsov case, and if he was one of Fortune's vics, the bad guy's already in jail." He hauled himself out of the leather chair and shuffled his cigarettes and lighter into his shirt pocket. "Come on. I'll grab the file." He headed for the door.

Emily opened her mouth, then slowly closed it without telling him the boy had lead her straight to his door. She had the feeling Bailor could not—or would not—tell her what that meant. She took the folder he handed her and followed him out to his car.

THE CEMETERY WAS A SLOPING PLAIN OF GREEN PLANTED WITH TOO FEW TREES; the summer sun leaned down hard as Emily climbed out of Bailor's car. The visitor's lot was mostly empty of cars and there was no one in sight except for the caretaker filling a gas-powered weed trimmer outside the office door. When Bailor slammed his door the caretaker looked up and stared at them. Bailor growled something under his breath and charged off along the road that curved across the face

of the hill. Emily trailed behind him, shoving her sunglasses up her nose and sweating, until he stopped and waited for her to catch up.

"Are you trying to give yourself a stroke?" she said when she saw his face. His cheeks were an ugly red, with white patches to either side of his nose.

His reply came so late she wasn't sure it *was* a reply. "The family got me thrown off the case. The wife did."

Emily walked along with him for a couple of strides, then said, "You mean someone else is working on it now?"

He gave a short, harsh laugh. "She's a felon and a psychic, but nobody ever said she was dumb."

"Screw this." Emily turned and headed back to the entrance.

"Come on, Lake, cut me some slack. I've been humping this case alone for months." He had to shout it after her. "Emily. Jesus Christ! I'm sorry!"

She stopped. The dead boy was back, standing in the grassy ditch beside the road. Electricity prickled up her spine and over her scalp. She turned and rejoined Bailor, who gave her an uneasy look as he started to walk again.

"How it was, was the wife called the precinct with a harassment complaint, and the precinct called my inspector to ask why the hell Major Crimes was investigating their dead-end case, and my inspector..." He waved a hand, brushing the lot of them aside. "My inspector tells me to take my holiday time, and the minute I'm out the door the precinct calls it suicide and closes the case."

And how long after that did you start drinking? Emily wondered. *Or did the inspector have more than one reason for sending you off on leave?* She decided she didn't really want to know. Unless the dead boy was one of the reasons?

Bailor stepped off the road to cross the springy lawn that grew between the graves. In this section enormous stones were set up like king-sized headboards topping the beds of grass. The one where Bailor stopped was polished, black-flecked red stone with the engraved letters and numbers painted black. To Emily's astonishment, Bailor crossed himself and bowed his head.

Andrew Dean Karsov
December 1989 – February 2000
Dean Alexei Karsov
June 1954 – February 2002

Emily glanced around, avoiding the sight of Bailor praying or whatever the hell he was doing. She half-expected Andrew to appear, naked, freckled, the rawness of his death behind his eyes. He didn't. Neither did his father. The other dead boy stood off a ways in a section that had smaller tombstones and a few shady trees.

Bailor took off his sunglasses and wiped his sweaty face on his T-shirt sleeve. He looked better, just tired and hot.

Emily said, "Now what?"

"You tell me." Bailor put his shades back on and looked at her, eyes hidden.

"Okay." She cocked her hip and jammed her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Karsov leads us to his wife, in which case you don't learn anything you don't already suspect, or he leads us to someone else that you can't investigate because you're on leave and—correct me if I'm wrong—a double vodka shy of getting your ass kicked off the force."

He said through clenched teeth, "So we give the information to my partner—"

"*And tell her where you got it from?*" Her shout hung in the hot summer air. "And that's only if Karsov were here. Because he's not, Bailor. I don't know if it was suicide or murder or what, and I don't frankly care. *Karsov* doesn't care, wherever the hell he is, and I don't know why *you* care, but—"

"You always did give up too easy," he said with savage scorn. "We haven't even tried the crime scene—"

"Give up! How about you get the nightmares and I get the promotions and then we talk about giving up!"

"You think it's been goddamn easy for me?"

"Before I left, or after? Yeah, I think *after* I left, it got so goddamn hard it scared you right into the bottle!"

His face was white with fury. He clenched his fists and stepped towards her. She whipped her hands free of her pockets and backed away.

"You got a problem here, detective?"

They both spun, shocked, to see a uniformed policeman standing at the open door of his patrol car.

It was easy enough to figure, Emily thought on the silent drive back to Bailor's. The drinking, the harassment complaint. The family probably told the caretaker to call the cops if Bailor showed up at the

gravesite. Her mind veered away from the image of Bailor standing over the grave, crossing himself with two fingers pinched against his thumb, holding something that wasn't there.

And veered again from that moment of stark certainty that the cop had been there for her. Her hands were still shaking from that burst of terror, though now that it was over, she could appreciate the irony that it had been Bailor who'd had all the patrolman's attention. She wondered what would happen if she thanked Bailor for that, and decided she probably didn't want to find out. He gripped the wheel so tightly she thought she could hear the plastic groan.

Back at his apartment she sat at the kitchen table and leafed through the Karsov file again. It had been a single-car accident, no one else hurt or killed. Andrew had been Karsov's only son. Like Bailor had said, there was no other boy in the case. Maybe Fortune *had* had another victim. But then why show himself now, after Fortune's conviction? And the way he was dressed and... It just didn't feel right.

Bailor stomped in, grabbed a couple of dish towels off the oven handle, stomped out again. He was, radiating a hurt so huge it filled the apartment, doing his laundry. When he had wrestled an overflowing hamper into the hall and slammed the door shut behind him, Emily propped her elbows on the table and pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes until she saw starry wheels. Then she leaned back and slapped the file closed. She was falling into Bailor's rut. Why assume the dead boy had anything to do with Karsov's death? Karsov was the detective's obsession, not hers.

Yet the dead boy had showed up at the cemetery.

And before that, the dead boy had led her right to Bailor's door.

She got up and pulled a jug of orange juice from the fridge, fresh-squeezed stuff that she'd bought with Bailor's money. It was cold and tart. She would rather it was beer. She drank standing at the counter, staring at nothing. The truth was, if she ignored the whole Karsov thing, one question became inevitable—became, in fact, the question she'd been ducking all along. What if Bailor was responsible for the kid's death? What if the Karsov obsession was only a blind, a way to hide from—

Bailor banged on the front door. Forgot his keys, Emily thought irritably and went tight-lipped to let him in. But it wasn't Bailor. It was a woman wearing a baggy tweed jacket and Dockers, her hair short, tightly curled, and going gray. She might as well have had the word COP tattooed on her forehead. Emily suffered another exhausting

rush of adrenaline—expecting recognition, expecting cuffs cold and hard about her wrists—but the look in the woman's eyes was only a cop's usual, base-line suspicion.

"You must be the niece," she said.

"You must be the partner," Emily said, then realized she'd gotten the tone all wrong. She smiled. "Detective Toms, right? We spoke on the phone?"

Toms smiled back, but the look in her eyes didn't change.

Emily led her into the kitchen, poured her a glass of juice. Toms looked around and said, "The place is looking better since the last time I was here."

"Yeah, it was a mess."

There was a pause. Toms eyed the untidy file on the table. "I guess the family sent you out to give him a hand."

"Nah, I just came for a visit."

"You must be pretty close, you and your uncle."

Emily shrugged. She wanted to grab the woman by the scruff of her neck and heave her out the door, and suspected she wasn't hiding the desire as well as she ought.

"I was kind of surprised, actually. I didn't think Will had any brothers or sisters."

Exactly the kind of lie, Emily was thinking, that puts the dumb criminals inside. "We're more like cousins," she said, "but Uncle Bill is just so much easier to say than Second Cousin Once Removed Bill. You know what I mean?"

Toms just gave her that look that says I *know* you're guilty, even if I don't know of what. A key scraped in the front door lock. Before Toms could move, Emily sang out, "Hey, Uncle Bill! Your partner's here!"

Late that night, Emily was stretched out under a sheet on Bailor's couch watching headlights light up the window blinds. Every time a car drove by, she could see the silhouette of the dead boy staring at her through the dark. She shifted the pillow under her neck, crossed her arms above her head.

Toms hadn't stayed long. She and Bailor had had a private conference in the living room while Emily banged around in the kitchen, ostentatiously making sandwiches, wishing like hell she dared to listen in. But she didn't want Toms any more curious than she was, not with the parole violation hanging over her head. It was already

damn scary. Toms hadn't been Bailor's partner at the time of the first murder case Emily had provided information on, but the whole of Major Crimes had been working on the case, and Emily had been a key witness. Or suspect, as it had turned out.

She kicked off the sheet, punched the pillow into a new shape.

The problem was, if anyone could tell her what the deal was with Bailor and the kid, it was probably Toms. But Jesus! What was she thinking? Bailor was a single-minded and insensitive asshole, but he wasn't a killer. Except, even as she thought it, she saw Jim Fortune lying on his back in his gravel yard, blood seeping across his chest. Andrew's ghost had led her and Bailor to his grave, and to Fortune, his murderer, and to Fortune's second victim, Ben, still alive but beaten, raped, locked in a stinking sewer-pit. When Fortune had come after Emily with a razor, Bailor had shot him. Not dead, but he sure hadn't cared whether Fortune lived or died. But then, neither had she.

Christ, she hated to think about that day. Bailor had arrested her once for trying to help with one murder investigation, then bullied her into helping with a second. And why not? He'd scored a promotion after the first one.

But she had to admit that wasn't entirely fair. Bailor had hated asking her as much as she had hated to agree. He hadn't even really believed her, about the ghosts and the dreams, until Andrew had led them to his killer, and to Ben. Bailor had just been so eaten up by the disappearances of those boys...

Emily slowly pushed herself upright on the couch, staring at the dead boy by the window.

He was desperate, Bailor had said. He'd do anything, ask anyone for help, because of those boys. And she'd asked him—not caring, just putting off the time she'd have to be alone with the dead—she'd asked him, *You got kids, Bailor?* And he'd said, *Jeff. He had leukemia. He was ten.*

Emily stretched out an arm, turned on the lamp. The dead boy was still there, with his tidy clothes and his tidy hair, waiting for her to figure it out, and do what needed to be done.

BAILOR DIDN'T WANT TO GO. "WHAT THE HELL'S THE POINT? YOU SAID HE wasn't there. I want to try the crime scene, then maybe his house, if we can swing by without tipping off the wife. Maybe I could wait in the car and you could..."

Forget Karsov, she wanted to say. *Fuck* Karsov. Though she winced

even as she thought it. Bailor droned on, locked as hard in his obsession as if she'd never said a thing, as if Toms hadn't. They hadn't made a dent, as far as Emily could see, so she didn't say it. She just sat across the kitchen table from him, listening to him talk, most of her attention on other things. Like Bailor crossing himself at the grave. Like his divorce, which had still been raw when they'd gone looking for the boys. Like the way he'd said about Karsov, *Because the guy's wife and her whole damn family hate his guts*, and later, *His wife blames him for the kid's death.*

It didn't take a goddamn psychologist.

When Bailor quit talking long enough to push his half-eaten eggs aside and light another cigarette, she said flatly, "We have to go back to the cemetery first."

It was even hotter today, muggy, with anvil-topped clouds doing a slow boil into the sky. The dead boy was waiting for them and they followed him without talking, Bailor without knowing. Even an easy stroll raised a sweat. The green, stone-studded slope was empty of the living. The presence of the dead might have been mistaken for the coming storm. Emily wiped her forehead and ran her fingers back over her scalp, spiking her hair, and wished she could once, just once, sleep the whole night through. When they came level with the Karsov's plot she kept going.

Bailor stopped and said, "This is it. Emily. Hey!" And then, anxious, like he already guessed, "Where are you going?"

She didn't say anything, didn't look back, just followed the dead boy across the hill toward the trees.

It was a little cooler in the shade, but there were tiny flies that buzzed around and stuck to her damp skin. The dead boy stood beside her, watching his father's reluctant approach. Emily kept her back to Bailor and her eyes on the gravestone, even when she heard his feet on the grass.

JEFFERY PETER BAILOR
1989 – 1998
FOREVER LOVED, FOREVER MISSED

Emily said, "I told you I came back because of a dead boy."

She could hear him breathing. He didn't speak.

"So you couldn't save Andrew, and you couldn't save Jeff, and Andrew's father couldn't live with his failure, and you wonder what

that makes you, when you could live with yours." She hesitated, hating this, but then she turned. He was staring at the gravestone. "Listen, Bailor. Jeff doesn't blame you, okay?"

Bailor's face didn't change, but when he blinked, tears rolled down his face and soaked into his mustache. He swallowed, and looked at Emily. "Is he here?"

She pulled in a breath, stuck her hands in her pockets. "Yeah, he's here."

"Is he..." Bailor wiped his face with the back of his hand. "What does he say?"

"You know they never talk to me."

He nodded, wiped his face again. He looked so damned tired.

"He came to get me, Will. He knew you were losing it, and he brought me here so I could kick your ass and get you out of it. So consider your ass kicked, okay? I'm tired—" and to her own surprise her voice wavered and cracked "—I'm tired of being haunted by dead boys. So do me a favor. Let him go."

Without looking at her, Bailor took a rough breath, and another one, as if he'd been underwater for too long. Then he leaned on his son's gravestone, and lowered himself stiffly to his knees.

Emily, having nowhere else to go, wandered back to the car. ✦

YOU'RE HERE BECAUSE
YOU LOVE THE ARTS.

SO ARE WE.

Alberta Foundation for the Arts

My dad used to say, "Honey, we're all part of one big thing called the universe." In the one big thing, death doesn't matter, because there's no time…

Grief

Patricia Sarrafian Ward

HIS BEAUTIFUL FACE. THE EYELASHES GONE WHITE IN OLD AGE, eyes blue-blind and dull with sorrowful adoration. I'm holding him. He is dying anyway, dying, have no choice. The vet hunches over the awful needle, the stiff tube. I can't look. The old-dog smell, hairs on my sweating hands, feeling through his ruff to the thin weak neck. Shush, shush, I love you, go to sleep.

Silence. A light snow falling. Where he tottered this morning, sagging into a pee, his sad little face fixed on the effort just to stay up, totter back where I lifted him up—

GRIEF IS WINTER IN YOUR CHEST. GRIEF IS THE CRASHING NOISE OF PLASTIC IN the next room when the vet wraps up the body. Grief is the thud-thud of bones and fur and sag of my old dog crumbling into the bin. Grief is a gust of freezing night, the bin hauled up into the van, the slamming doors.

* * *

It's been ten days since Benny died. My friend Gaby clomps around the room, blowing out candles. Wax sprays onto the mantle, onto the photo of Benny running on the beach years ago, zigzagging joy through the sand. From within my frozen mind, an image conjures of myself later, hunched over the photo with a razor blade, making a tidy pile of the wax specks. I can't stop Gaby now, she's on a mission. She rolls up Benny's bed, stuffs it into a garbage bag. Hairs float, settle on her wool skirt, white against electric blue. To her credit, she doesn't get any madder. She just keeps going, tidy, fast, organized, everything I'm not. It's snowing out, so she dumps the garbage bag in the hallway. I look away in case she reads my intent, the future me opening the bag, retrieving my Benny-bed, breathing in the scent. Collecting the hairs into a clump I can touch with my fingertips, like touching him.

I am furtive in my grief, biding my time in shock and misery. Her brusque acts have stripped me of my voice. She stops, there being nothing left to do short of vacuuming, and I'm glad she hates to vacuum because the hairs are all I've got left. She has a cold. She blows her little red nose violently, then mashes up the tissue as if her cold is the last straw. Even sick and annoyed, she looks gorgeous with her thick black stockings, short skirt and clunky shoes, the streaked hair and glinting diamond chips. We were supposed to go on our Saturday lunch, but I'm too miserable. I'm in pajamas and my dad's wool dressing gown. Today is grief all over, for all the dead. In his dressing gown pocket is a little pencil; my dad was a professor and kept them everywhere, to make notes. I clutch the pencil inside the pocket. I'm imagining him and Benny in a field, an afterlife fantasy I used to scoff at.

My voice squeaks up from the black cave of my misery. "I guess you just don't get it," I say.

"I *do* get it," Gaby argues. "Everything dies, and it's sad."

The words numb me. I think, *I've known you since high school.* I shift my dad's pencil around, dig the sharp point into my palm.

"Zoë, you have to try. Why don't you just get another dog?"

Grief is words digging out your chest. If I was dirt, I'd be a crumbling hole.

"I mean, everybody goes through it. And I'm sure there's a dog just like Benny waiting for a home like yours—"

"I don't want another Benny."

"I just—'

"If I go out and get another dog, it doesn't *mean* anything!" My voice pours out, unstoppered anguish. "You can't replace love, just like that! What the hell is wrong with everyone? Before he was even dead, people told me: Get another one to make it easier! What is that? I mean, if everyone did that, what kind of world would it be? I mean, would you say that about my dad? Would you say: Oh, Zoë, get over it; just go get another dad?"

My voice is gone. I'm just standing there, blubbering, my sorrow so huge, gawping, it's going to sweep everything up, her, the room, toss it all apart. Now she'll understand. She has to.

Gaby wipes her nose, folds up the tissue. She looks at me with pity.

"Well, Zoë," she says. "That *is* what I'd tell you."

Silence. Through the window I see the gray metal sky, white snow gently falling. The branches tap the window as the wind picks up. Gaby smoothes her shimmering blue skirt. "Can I have some tea?" she asks.

And I go to the kitchen, set the pot on the stove, stare at the flames licking out. I can't figure out why I didn't argue. But argue what? The inarguable callousness of my dearest friend? My head's gone foggy, my whole body feels dulled and exhausted. I want to think this through, but my thoughts go nowhere, stunted bits of word floating by. The need to sleep overwhelms me. I feel Gaby's firm grip on my arms. She guides me to my bedroom, lays me down. Her pretty, sweet face hovers over me, eyebrows puckered. I hate her.

"You're overtired," she says. "My Zoë, always making a drama."

I must be dreaming. This is a dream. I scrunch my eyes shut, hard as possible. My body clenches up, a bowstring on the point of firing a fireball of grief at the world. Just ten days ago, my Benny lay here next to me, all gangly and dying, his ribs heaving against my hands. On that day, our last cuddle, he looked into my eyes for the longest time, like he was talking. Like he knew. My inside self wails, *Maybe he didn't want to die! Maybe he was trying to tell me!*

"You did the right thing," Gaby says, stroking my head, so I realize I wailed out loud. "But all this is unnecessary. Go to sleep."

The kettle whistles and she gets up, leaves. The shrill sound cuts abruptly, and I hear the water being poured. I'm crying again, the pillow soaked up and warm.

* * *

MORNING. I WAKE UP GROGGY, DISORIENTED. WINTER-DARK DAWN JUST edging through the blinds.

There's so much time now, before work. It lies ahead, just beyond the covers where I'm huddled. It's a space I have to walk through, cold and miserable and alone. No bundling up, no jingling dog tags as Benny trots around, waiting to get outside in the snow. I slow down the morning routine, filling up the empty time. Coffee, toast. A second piece of toast, why not. I could walk anyway, for the exercise. I picture myself trudging down the street, pumping my arms, alone. I make my lunchtime sandwiches, piling on extra cheese. Grief is a void; it is hunger filling up the body.

There's an empty cup in the sink, the tea bag crumpled stiff. I stare at it. Now I remember: Gaby was here yesterday. But it was the middle of the day. So I slept all day, all night. She said such awful things. I squint at the cup, trying hard to put together why, but it's like fumbling into a dark place. The hurt is so awful, it's a knife jammed into my chest, right through the bone.

No one understands.

The apartment is quiet, dead quiet. Benny and I would watch the morning news, him with his head in my lap, me pretending to make sense of the world. His dying laid bare the truth, that I don't care what's going on, not really; it has nothing to do with me. It was just part of our morning, meaningful only because of us sitting together.

I get my stuff together: coat, bag, hat. I pick up the keys last, and the jingle of them, like every day, is the blaring noise of absence.

MY CUBICLE AT WORK HAS A WINDOW, I'M ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES. I HANG up my coat, hat, scarf and lay the bag on the filing cabinet. Outside the snow's blowing sideways, but inside, all you can hear is the hum of computers and soft voices.

Jerod pokes his head over the adjoining cubicle wall. "Hey, Zoë," he says softly.

"Morning," I say, fussing with stuff on my desk.

"How're you doing?"

"I'm fine." I sit down, making like I have a lot to do. I was fond of Jerod, but the day I was sniffling here, Benny at the vet having all those tests, his solution was why not get a puppy to make the transition easier. I haven't really spoken to him since. But he's waiting, hanging on to the conversation by not moving. I say reluctantly, "What's up?"

"Gaby said you were still sad yesterday."

I'm riveted by an image of me standing in the living room, weeping. *Still sad.* The implication that I shouldn't be. *What the hell business is it of his?*

I'm in hell, I realize. I've been tossed into some kind of hell.

I'm staring at my fists clenched in my lap, and Jerod's waiting.

"I'm fine," I tell him. But his expression shows he's already made up his mind I'm not. He nods at the lie, sinks back into his own space, leaving me alone.

I SIT VERY STILL, FEELING STRANGENESS ALL ABOUT ME.

My desk: papers, computer, old candy wrapper, spilled paperclips, tape dispenser, pictures of Benny, my dad, other family. A few books, my red mug. It's all the same, but there's something wrong. Wrong the way a dream can be, the familiar shifted ever so slightly, tinted with the unknown.

I get angry. I consider crossing to Gaby's side of the room to tell her she's being a complete bitch, and what's the matter with everyone, but then I imagine her saying, Still sad, with that look of pity. I imagine a headline, *Researcher Goes on Rampage of Grief.*

Out of nowhere, I'm shivering, weepy. It takes all my will to quench the hysteria spiraling up in my chest.

Focus. It's Benny. It's understandable you feel so horrible.

I'm grateful for the partitions, the implied solitude of my job. I push away the notion that if I stand up, expose myself over the cubicle wall, I'll find everyone staring.

MY JOB IS TO RESEARCH ARTICLES FOR THE SENIOR WRITERS, WHO ARE TOO BUSY composing to do the grunt work. We put out a home improvement magazine once a month. I have a pile-up for not having been productive in the past week. The computer hums, my fingers race the keyboard, bringing up page after page of information on stenciling, mitering, boiler maintenance, installing a concrete floor. The paper grows to two inches thick on the printer bed. It's okay, we recycle. I search through my drawers for a highlighter. My desk, my car, my apartment, everything's a big mess and always has been; my dad used to tell me it was a reflection of my genius mind. I smile when I think of that.

Instead of a highlighter, I find the hideous card. The sympathy

card from everyone in the office, a grinning retriever on the front. Inside, their signatures and inane messages scrawled every which way—people try so hard to stand out on these cards—all around the main printed message: How About Me? Probably printed by some animal shelter. I shove it to the back of the drawer. Gaby arranged for this; she was the only one who'd even met Benny. "Do you like it?" she asked that day, totally innocent of my bewildered anguish.

I thought it was a mistake made by someone who's never had a pet. Made by all of them. But they do have pets. Marcie has a cat. And that writer on the third floor, she has an iguana or something.

How could they?

I close the drawer. My dad smiles at me from the photograph. He's got his arm around Mom, who's examining a flower pot and missed the moment I snapped the photo. I miss her awfully. Suddenly I decide: I'm flying out to see her next weekend, *Surprise!* We can go for chocolate frappes and gab the day away. The notion fills me up with pleasure, and my dad's grin seems to get bigger, like he approves. My dad used to say, "Honey, we're all part of one big thing called the universe." In the one big thing, death doesn't matter, because there's no time. "Like a black hole?" I asked when I learned about that in Physics class. "Sort of," Dad said, and I could tell he was impressed.

When my dad was dying, I said, "One big thing," and that made him happy.

One big thing, I think, and I'm smiling through my tears. We're all going to the same place, I tell myself, and there's comfort in that. Comfort in remembering, even in the grief.

It's almost lunchtime but I've already eaten my sandwiches. I've sent up three batches of research and one of the writers emailed to tell me I'm on fire. I've never liked that saying. It brings to mind someone on fire, running down the street screaming. I saw a news show once: this man's daughter had jumped out a burning building, run down the block, then died from her burns. He kept mumbling, "She was already dead, but she didn't know it." It made me cry. The only thing he thanked God for, he said, was that he had two other daughters and grandkids on the way, or else he'd have died himself.

An ad pops up on my screen. I'm about to click it closed, but I glimpse the words HOW ABOUT ME?

How odd. I look closer. It's a building with an open door. The shading suggests the rooms within are full of light. The building has rows

of windows occupied by smiling people with curlicue name plates beneath the window sills: *Daughter. Husband. Employer. Lover. Caretaker. Father.*

Tap, tap, tap.
Tap.

"Zoë?"

It's Gaby, bending close, her nails tapping the desk. My cheek's mashed against a pile of papers. I've been asleep. My shoulders ache from the twist. Gaby smells of peanut butter; she eats the same thing every day and never gains an ounce. "Zoë, did you see this?"

I blink at the screen. The pop-up ad is still there. Beneath the open door are the words, How About Me? and in smaller print, The Shelter. Open Year-Round, 24 Hours a Day, followed by directions. About an hour outside the city, I calculate.

"What do you think?" Gaby asks, full of caution.

But I'm looking out the window in astonishment. There's a billboard a few blocks away, showing the same building, the rows of smiling faces. The question is gigantic, How About Me? hovering over the city, forlorn and cheerful all at once. Why didn't I see it before?

"I think you're finally coming around," Gaby exclaims. She grabs my shoulder. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"How do you feel?"

"But what is it?" I ask Gaby, who seems to be in the know. Everyone knows, everyone but me.

"Oh, Zoë. It's the *Shelter*. You aren't completely back, are you."

"Back?"

"Zoë, you've been having—episodes. You haven't been quite right. Going on about how terrible you feel, how lonely you are." She bends a little closer, confides, "It's been really hard on everyone else, too. It's good you're getting out of it."

"I was sleeping," I say dumbly, rubbing my cheek.

"You've been ill, sweetie," she says. She gestures at the billboard encouragingly. "Just go. You know you want to."

The simplicity of this befuddles me. It's true: I do want to go. I know this the way you know some old memory clawing up through the muck.

Gaby shuts off my computer. She holds my coat out. "I'm so glad,

Zoë," she sighs. "I thought *I'd* go crazy soon."

I GET THE CAR GOING BEFORE IT'S WARMED UP, A MIRACLE. THE LUNCHTIME highway's empty. How did I not see the signs? They're everywhere, directing all traffic toward one destination, the Shelter.

I pretend it's the car, not me, that follows the signs.

After about ten miles, I realize I should have pressed Gaby. Just sat her down, asked until she made things clear. But I panicked. In the hot rumbling solitude of my little car, I remember everyone's faces turning toward me as I hurried out. The looks of surprise, then sympathy. Like they knew.

Knew what?

She's been having episodes. Still sad.

I'm insane. I'm a character in a bad soap, waking up from a coma to an insane world. I'm in Invasion of the Body Snatchers. They're after me, and soon it'll all be over.

You were *insane*, I correct myself. *And they all knew it except you.*

I jam down the accelerator. But there's no siren, no halt and step out into the winter day. No relief from the road that draws me inexorably onward.

THE PARKING LOT IS JAM-PACKED. I CRAWL THE CAR AROUND, STARTING NEAR the front of the building because you never know, then weaving one row after another till I give up and head around back. It's full there too. I get the spot farthest away, under an ancient maple heavy with snow that looks like it could all fall on the car in one giant lump.

The parking spot's so far away, it takes ten minutes to get to the building. By the time the automatic door opens, I'm a popsicle with shoes. Benny hated days like this. He'd dash out, pee, dash back in and expect breakfast.

"Welcome," the receptionist says. "Please take a number."

The ticket pops out: 612. Dismayed, I start to ask how long the wait will be, but she's already talking with someone else. I contemplate leaving.

"Your ticket," the receptionist rebukes.

I take it, go sit down in one of the vast pleather armchairs. This is the biggest building I've ever been in, and looking up at the endless walls, doors, stairs, potted plants, I think it must be the biggest one in the world. The chairs are scattered artfully across the vast marble floor, accented with palms or ficus, side-tables, magazine

racks. They're almost all occupied. There's a low, constant murmur. Every so often, a door opens and an official-looking person emerges to guide one of us away.

"Miss Zoë Dean?"

I jump; she's almost on top of me. I must have dozed again. The clock shows it hasn't been that long, though, only about a half hour. She catches me glancing at the ticket number and admits with an apologetic smile, "Your friend called ahead. She asked if we could make an exception. She didn't want you to relapse."

Relapse.

"My name's Jackie," she says, touching her name tag with an oval fingernail. "I'm a volunteer with the Shelter, and I will be your guide."

"Hi," I say stupidly.

"Hmm. You really *are* a mess, aren't you?"

I shake my head. The glass doors are just a short dash away. But she's so nice and honest-seeming. She has brown hair pulled back with pins and a crisp khaki jacket that's got authority stamped all over it. I want to give myself over to her. I'm just so tired.

"Grief is such an insidious disease," she says gently. "It's just so terrible. I'm sorry you've been through this. Come with me."

I bumble after her, feeling big and dumb next to her effortlessness. We travel down long white hallways, come to her office. Very tidy, a green velour couch, soft-lit lamp with a beaded shade, towering bookshelves.

"This reading should help you get back to normal," she tells me, briskly pulling together pamphlets and papers from the shelves. "It doesn't take long once recovery's begun. The feelings will come and go, however, for a little while longer. But it shouldn't be too long now."

I stare up at her with my hands tucked between my knees.

"Oh, Zoë. Don't be frightened! It's time to move on. Trust yourself." She plunks the pamphlets onto the table. The top one says in dark purple: I'M NO LONGER WANTED ... WHAT NEXT? with a photograph of a woman looking forlornly skyward, as if the answer lies in the blue.

"Oops!" Jackie whips the pamphlet off the top, slides it under the pile. "I'm sorry, Zoë. Don't get all worked up. You *are* still wanted, of course. You know that, don't you?" She bends closer, peering at me with intense concern. I nod, though I know nothing. "We include this one, well, just in case. It could happen, after all."

"What—?"

She points at the papers. "I'll be back soon."

The room falls to stillness when she is gone. I sink back into the couch. After a time, I pick up one of the pamphlets, just to see.

THE DOOR CLICKS SOFTLY, AND LIGHT STREAMS IN FROM THE HALLWAY. JACKIE asks, "Do you understand?"

I do understand. I know I've been sick, but the feelings are still welling up, I can't shake them.

"I miss him," I say raggedly. But even as I say it, I feel the grief sliding away, just a little farther. I have to struggle to conjure the weak watery eyes and smelly old teeth, paw with cracked and hardened pads on my arm. Anxiety surges up in me. "I'll never forget him," I blurt.

"Oh, Zoë. You've got to get better now," she sighs with a chastening look. "You can see wellness around the corner, but you're clinging to your sickness!"

I hang my head, ashamed and confused.

"It shouldn't take much longer, Zoë," she says with a little more sympathy. "Come along."

We go down a maze of spotless hallways. I'm worn out, heavy, like my limbs are full of water. The awful feelings surge up and retreat, but the space in between gets longer and longer. We go down an escalator and arrive in a station crowded with people, many of them in the same volunteer uniform Jackie's wearing. A small train pulls up, and we climb on. Time passes, the bland marble walls flashing by. I doze a little. Jackie was right. The feelings are so infrequent now, like little pinpricks. It's like that hour of the evening when your hangover finally recedes, and you think you might actually be up for a glass of wine.

"Who do you want to see, Zoë?"

We're standing in front of a wall of signs. Each has a photograph, category, and directions. Jackie points. "How about a replacement for Benny?"

It's the grinning retriever from the card. I shake my head.

Jackie murmurs, "But you don't really feel so sad anymore, do you?"

I consider this. I remember Benny's moping last-day face, the feel of his body, so thin and weak under my hands. I feel something, but distantly, just barely. Mostly, I feel relief that I feel so much better.

"Oh, you've made a full recovery!" Jackie says, pleased. "Well,

then?"

"I'd like to try life without all the hair everywhere," I say, perusing the board. *Grandmother. Aunt. Mother. Wife. Husband. Uncle.*

There. I hadn't even known I was looking for them, but as soon as I see, I know. I point. "I'm curious to see them."

"The Dads?" She nods understandingly. "How many years has it been, Zoë?"

"Six."

"Oh my, it's about time! This way."

Back into the endless corridors, following her crisp march. We come to a door marked Available For Adoption: Dads. Jackie slides her ID through the scanner and the door swings open. A wide hallway yawns into the distance, rows of doors and windows on either side.

"Wow," I say. "There sure are a lot of Dads."

"It's the post-Christmas crowd. The holidays are such an emotional time; people come to realizations, make decisions, want to make changes in their lives. Please," she invites me toward the first window. "Everyone is classified according to the primary relationship the Shelter identifies. Dads are of course more than just Dads; they are doctors, or garbage men, or writers. They are card-players and gardeners, cooks and carpet-layers. But these roles are secondary to the *relational* role. A Dad may also be a Granddad, or a Husband, or a Lover, and so on. But the Shelter must discern his primary role, his core being."

"Isn't it also based on what was rejected?"

"Yes. The Dads are unwanted by their children. Usually they have no other relationals left to sustain them as wanted. Here is Harry," she says. "He's been with us for several months now. Don't worry, he can't see us," she adds. "The glass is one-way."

Harry doesn't look too good. He lies on the bed with his hands folded on his big belly. The TV is on, but he is asleep. I spy soiled underwear under the table. The fridge looks like a turn-of-the-century relic.

"They arrive with their own things of course. Harry is—difficult," Jackie says carefully. "But we're working with him in Behavioral. He's come a long way. We would require the adopter to continue with his classes."

I'm already moving on.

"We give them temporary names when they come in," Jackie explains, walking at my side. "That's why you see only a first name.

Some adopters will assign a name on the papers, but most prefer to choose one with their adoptee as a way to forge a bond. The last name will of course be your own."

There are so many Dads. Young, old—mostly old. Some of them know when we're looking through the glass. They can sense it, or maybe they hear footsteps under the door. They pretend to be unaware, but I can tell from the stiffened shoulders, the discreet glance. That look of trepidation and hope.

My heart is breaking.

"I know," Jackie says, touching my cheek. "It's very sad."

"I want them all! How can people just dump their dads?"

"Oh, Zoë. Any one of us could end up here. All you can do is your best. Behave well, be considerate, adapt to all new circumstances without a fuss. But in the end, you can't control your loved ones' minds and hearts." She gives me a quick hug, smiling. "But that's why we have the Shelter! And we *are* No-Kill. We only euthenize the ones who are too sick or unlikely to adjust."

The next room is different. It's a study paneled in oak, the bookshelves rising elegantly all the way to the ceiling. The carpets are threadbare Persians, here and there a glimpse of wood floor. There's a rumpled bed on one side, divided from the rest of the room by a silk screen from which hangs a wool robe. In the center of the room is a huge desk. An old man is sitting at it, frowning at his typewriter. His wispy hair is carefully combed. He's dressed in a professorly tweed and tie, though they only get taken for a walk around the parking lot once a day. The card reads:

JOHN
DAD ♥

The heart means he has special needs. I read on:

JOHN IS A TENDER-HEARTED THINKER WHO NEEDS LOTS OF TLC BECAUSE OF A BAD HEART. HE'S WORKING ON A NEW BOOK, BUT HE LOVES TO COOK & GARDEN TOO! HE'S WAITING FOR THAT SPECIAL SOMEONE TO TAKE HIM HOME—IS THAT SOMEONE YOU?

The Dad rolls the paper up a few notches, cranes his neck forward to worriedly examine the last line of type. He has big, soft-looking ears; they make him seem defenseless.

I can't bear it. I can't. I keep going. The next few Dads I can hardly focus on. Jackie murmurs facts about each one, leading me ever-for-

ward, ever-farther from the Dad at the desk.

"Zoë?"

I haven't been listening. We're looking at a Dad who's crouched before a boiler, a wrench dangling from his huge fist.

"We bring in projects for them," Jackie says. "This boiler's been piped into our own water main. We're hoping he can fix it. It belongs to a non-profit downtown. It's another small way to help."

I could ask him questions for my home improvement research, I think. But I'm not feeling it. There's no spark.

Jackie knows. She asks, "Do you want to see the professorly Dad again?"

We walk the long way back. The Dad's gotten up from his desk. He rummages through the books on his shelves, finds one. He turns the pages with care, reading, adjusting the glasses on his nose every so often. His pants hang off his waist; he's too thin. Jackie has explained that the transition can lead to depression, loss of appetite.

"How could they?" I beg Jackie. "How could they not want him anymore?"

"Oh, Zoë. Who can know? They said they were moving and had no more time for him. He's apparently fussy about his medication; he requires attention, to make sure he stays on top of his health. But who ever knows the true reason? It could be because he's gotten old and sick."

All he did was get old, I'm thinking. In that moment when his kids' love broke down into who gets him when and damn the waiting list at the home, he became unwanted. Maybe he argued on the way to the Shelter. Or maybe he didn't know where they were going till it was too late—

But I can't be too hasty. "He could have been selfish. Rotten in some way."

"He neglected them," Jackie admits. "He was always wrapped up in his work. But Zoë, we do screen all adoptees very carefully. We have a battery of psychologists on staff. John passed all the tests, or he wouldn't be here before you."

The reference to where this dear man would be otherwise upsets me.

"But here he is," Jackie says brightly. "He's writing a new book on evolutionary models," she says with pride.

"Doesn't he miss his family?"

"He did, at first. But he knows he can and will be adopted, just as

you know that you can find another doggie or a Dad, anytime you want."

You can't make such a big decision too fast, I'm thinking. *It's a big commitment! And what about a dog?* I think of Benny's soft muzzle, the blue-hazed eyes. But the hair—ugh. The Dad sits back down, looks around like he's lost something. He fiddles with papers, lifts them to peer underneath. He opens a drawer. Then he smiles a little ruefully and pats his pocket. He pulls out a short pencil.

That decides it. "I'll take him."

THE ADOPTION PROCESS IS LENGTHY. I'M THERE THE WHOLE DAY, FILLING OUT forms, talking to staff, including the psychologists who worked with the Dad I want. Normally, they tell me, the process takes much longer, even up to a few weeks, but they can tell I'm the perfect match for this Dad. He's been here so long, they don't want to make him wait a single day more. Throughout, they express subtle approval and respect; it is rare for someone to choose an old one. People want young Dads, Dads who can still do things.

A question comes up about my mom; my plan to visit will obviously have to be delayed so the Dad can settle in. And if they don't get along, the psychologist tells me, that's not unusual. There are plenty of other Moms available; I can get him one he likes, if it seems he needs companionship. "But he's very engaged in his work," Jackie says. "I think a single-parent home will be a fine environment for him."

At around four-thirty, they lead the Dad through the holding door. He comes through blinking, clutching a worn leather briefcase to his chest. He's shined his shoes.

"This is Zoë," Jackie says cheerily.

His eyes are watering. "Zoë," he says gently, nodding. He smells of pipe and paper. His soft old hands are dry, the veins dark against the pale skin.

I'm terrified he won't love me. That I'll hate his smell, his stuff, his snores. He won't cook after all and I'll keep living on cheese sandwiches and cereal.

"His things will arrive tomorrow," Jackie is going over the last-minute details. "Someone from the shelter will help set up his study, if you want."

"Okay."

The car! It's too far, too cold for his old heart. I panic, because

we're all heading for the door. Mumble something to Jackie, take off running. I glimpse the Dad's face, stunned, bereft.

He thinks I've changed my mind.

"I'm getting the car!" I shout. Jackie's patting his shoulder, and he looks relieved.

My car: it's too messy. I spend long seconds flinging garbage from the front into the back. The Benny-hairs cover the front seat; they're going to get into that tweed for good. But there's no time. I race around, get in the driver's seat. For a terrible moment, the engine refuses to turn over.

I weave through the parking lot, trying to hurry without looking like an unsafe driver. He's waiting on the curb, standing a little taller now, the briefcase dangling from his hand. I pull up. Jackie opens the door and the Dad climbs in with some difficulty; it's a small car, not made for tall old men with arthritis.

"I should get a new car," I say.

"Buckle up!" Jackie sings.

Don't leave me! I'm thinking, and the Dad says, "It's a fine little car."

His voice is gentle and abstracted. I focus intently on driving, as if making my way through the lot, up the little road and onto the highway requires utmost concentration. He's the one who breaks the quiet.

"What is your house like, Zoë? Does my room have light?"

"Yes, definitely," I blather anxiously. "Lots of light—I thought of that. The desk will fit. And a full-size bed, if you want a bigger one."

He looks grateful. He returns his gaze to the world going by. The traffic is heavy, edging into rush hour. I swing over to the left lane, accelerate.

"Now, Zoë, there is a speed limit," the Dad says mildly.

A dart of resentment at this remark, but isn't this what Dads do? Bug their kids to be careful?

I pull back into the middle lane. He rolls down the window.

"What are you doing?" I say, cautiously. "It's freezing."

"I just want to feel the wind on my face, Zoë."

He tucks his arm over the sill and bends his head out the window, straining against the seat belt. I slow down a bit. My Dad closes his eyes and puts his face into the wind, grinning. His wispy hair flies, and we sail down the highway towards home. ✤

Vampire

Catherine MacLeod

MOONRISE CAME WITH ANTICIPATION AND DREAD. HE WAS impatient and hungry. She'd forgotten that shame hadn't always been part of her.

She smiled because he thought she should. Embraced him because he expected it. Cried out as he bit her, crushed her, whispered her name into her mouth.

Endured his love until the blood ran.

The bed creaked as he rose. The floor creaked as he crossed it. He paused at the door.

"Goodnight, dear."

"Goodnight, Daddy." ✤

Windchimes

Catherine MacLeod

THE DEAD SANG. HE LEFT HIS AT THE UNDERTAKER'S AND followed their voices into the street, into an alley, through a battered door.

A woman looked up from her workbench at the back of the shop. "Yes?"

"I heard..." He gestured to the hundreds of chimes strung overhead.

"Yes, I made those. Look around, if you like."

He drifted, wondering at the strange music; for the first time in days not hearing screaming metal and exploding tires. He watched her finish a new chime, tying jointed ivory beads, and crystals as blue as inquisitive eyes.

He said, "That's beautiful."

"Thank you. The materials just came in."

The wind touched them. The dead sang. His wife whispered that the children were finally asleep. His sons laughed at their father's jokes.

He bought the chimes and followed their voices home.

X-Out

Catherine MacLeod

GAMBLING IS ABOUT FAITH. YOU APPROACH THE CRAPS table like an altar.

Roll the dice in your hand like the Host.

Two hours ago they took the rest of my toes and most of my fingers.

There is *nothing* like a no-limit game.

Gambling is about karma. The possibilities tilt the world on its axis; one win crosses out all losses. The promise of success undoes the past: if I win I'll get my job back; if I win she'll be mine again.

If I lose again, they'll make me drop my pants.

Gambling has its own language—breathless prayers, abbreviated gestures. The language of need.

My turn. One throw.

I have two fingers left. Did you know that when you twist them for luck you're actually making the sign of the cross?

You've gotten so good at tuning out that by the time you actually did *hear the commotion, the sharp sounds, voices and that final slam, they were already vibrations dying away on the air. And then you weren't sure what you'd heard....*

Pizza Night

Laurie Channer

THERE'S A SLAM LIKE A GUNSHOT GOING OFF. IT MAKES YOU and Lesley both jump a foot on the couch, nerves instantly on edge. You look across the clutter of the big loft to see Tim, electric and alone, near the door, his date nowhere in sight. "Shut up!" he yells over. "She's gone, all right?" He whirls and punches the door, hard, twice, and that shakes you, too. "FUCK!!" he blares. Of course he hurt himself. "FUCK!!" again. Of course it made him madder. Past the plants, bookshelves and entertainment unit, he kicks at something you can't see, and you hope it's nothing of yours or Les's. You know he's acting out, but it twists your guts to see force applied like this.

He bounds over to his area and turns up his thrash metal, Slipknot or Tool or one of those bands whose name adorns most of his T-shirts. That's not usually a problem, after all; you like Hole.

It's getting harder to hear the movie you rented, but you bite your tongue before daring to say anything. Even before tonight you've been finding it harder and harder to confront him, because of the ensuing hassles. "C'mon, Tim," you try, more wheedlingly than decisively. You want this to be a nice night for Les, who's had a bad week with pain. "What's the rule about volume?"

He turns his too-bright eyes toward the two of you. It's well-lit over where he is; he switched on his track lighting a while ago, and Les turned your lights down to watch the TV screen better at the start of the movie. It's like he's showcased in spotlights for you and Lesley, the audience, in the near dark, side by side on the sofa over in the other end of the loft. Tim waits just long enough to make you think he's going to ignore you, which might actually be a relief in itself, but then he hops over to his stereo and dials it down to the marker you all agreed to six months ago when he moved in. It's a line at 6 in red-black nail polish. It's his, from a night he went to see Marilyn Manson. Les threw all her nail polish out years ago, and you've never owned any. Six is still kind of loud, but the loft is big enough that you're supposed to be able to hear the TV in your end while he plays his music in the other end, near the door, no one disturbing the other, especially not Lesley now that she's on disability. You wondered when he moved in what you and Les would do if he didn't respect the volume arrangement, what kind of trouble that would be. Those were the days.

HYPERACUITY HAS SET IN NOW, THOUGH, AND YOU'RE SENSITIVE TO THE slightest noise from Tim's end. And the noise is more than slight. He's still pissed, and he's not done showing it. He wants to be noticed, of course, so you and Les avoid so much as glancing his way, the same reason and the same way you've made it a practice to determinedly stare away from stretch limos when you see them gliding through the center of the city. You don't want to give him the satisfaction of attention.

IT'S *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* ON THE DVD PLAYER, FOUR HOURS OF IT, YOUR PICK because you've never seen it before and it's supposed to be stupendous. It's wasted, though, because with all Tim's slamming around, you can't concentrate, haven't picked up on who the characters are or what's going on. Every scene is newly disorienting. Les has had to explain to you nine times who Alec Guinness is playing. You can think of him only as Obi-Wan Kenobi, a calm and comforting presence from *Star Wars*, and you wish he was here. Instead, he looks so different in this picture, and it unsettles you more than it ought to. It's only a movie. You reach for the remote, ready to bail on the whole thing, but Les takes it from you. "This is what we do. Don't let him win."

You know what she means. It's Friday night: date night, movie

night, pizza night. It *is* what you and she do together, and have done since you met. You do it even though she's barely mobile any more with her fibromyalgia and her wrecked back. It's the highlight of her week now that she can't teach any more.

The movie's meant nothing to you now, though, since the first half hour. The pizza's sitting cold on the coffee table in front of you, barely touched. Tim *has* won, even though his beef wasn't with either of you. The more he bangs things around in his end of the loft, the more he enlarges his own angry sphere. He's constricted yours and Lesley's two-thirds of the loft till it feels like the two of you are sitting together on a little life raft the size of this couch, this table and this TV screen, exposed and adrift in his turmoil.

TIM IS PUTTERING SLIGHTLY LESS NOISILY ON HIS SIDE OF THE LOFT. YOU SNEAK a look and see he's rummaging through desk drawers, in the manner of a Muppet, even down to tossing the stuff he doesn't want willy-nilly back over his shoulder. He moves to the kitchen, does the same through the utensil drawers.

"I can't find the big scissors!" he yells. "Where's the big scissors?! I neeeeed the GOOOOOOD scissors!"

You stop looking. You know the sound each drawer makes, though, and can follow his path by listening, though you're trying not to hear.

"SOMEONE HAS TO HELP ME FIND THE GOOD SCISSORS!"

You sit up straighter on the couch and start to open your mouth to holler back when Lesley puts a hand on your arm. She shakes her head wearily, her meds draining her. This is old news, Tim venting out loud. This is what *he* does. And what it always does to you. It's always the same amplitude whether it's something major like spilling coffee on his computer, or minor, like a pen that won't write. But tonight you don't know why it's especially menacing. Maybe you and Lesley don't need his share of the rent *that* badly.

"Are you just going to sit there, you great fat puddings, or is someone going to help me?"

Lesley shakes her head again. "Don't take the bait," she says, not taking her eyes from the screen. "Don't give him the satisfaction."

Sharing a loft is an exercise in *not* hearing. Your friends always ask, "Sure, maybe you can tune out somebody else's TV or phone conversation, but what about, you know... *sex*?"

You actually *can* ignore the noises of him with a girl. In fact, it

sounds so embarrassingly clumsy, you'd rather not listen in. And he's had to tune out you and Lesley. He hasn't said it's a problem. In loft-living, when you can't help but hear, the unspoken rule is to at least pretend you don't. Despite the insinuations some people have made about him listening in, you seriously doubt he's been getting off on the sound of two overweight, middle-aged dykes going at it, as infrequently as it happens. It's not what twenty-two-year-olds salivate over when they think of girl-on-girl scenarios.

But it's why you don't really know what's gone on here tonight. You've gotten so good at tuning out that by the time you actually *did* hear the commotion, the sharp sounds, voices and that final slam, they were already vibrations dying away on the air. And then you weren't sure what you'd heard. And it's *that* and what you have or haven't done about it that's the real problem. Not Tim.

He's still bashing around in his end, muttering away to himself, occasionally tramping back and forth to the bathroom, and you feel small in the face of it. You finally say to Les what's been bothering you the most. You say it very quietly, sunk down as you are on the couch, partly so Tim can't hear and partly because you're ashamed. It's over an hour too late. "I think he hit her."

Lesley's answer is quick. She's not as zoned on her medication as you thought she was. "No, he didn't. He wouldn't. We were sitting right here."

"We heard something."

Les is firm. "That was a door slam."

"You don't want to believe he hit her because we didn't do anything." All the things you and Les have stood for, marched for, spoken out about, the rainbow of ribbons you've worn. But that was years ago, before you both got so tired. Take Back the Night? Hell, tonight you can't even Take Back the Loft.

"It wasn't the sound of flesh hitting flesh," Lesley says. "It was something hard. She slammed the door on her way out, or he slammed it after her. She's not here anymore, is she?"

You cast your mind back to that one specific moment, the first minute everything changed. There were raised voices you hadn't been properly aware of except in retrospect, and the one loud sound that drew your attention to the fact that *something* had been going on. Les is right, it wasn't a smack on skin, nor even a fist to soft flesh. It had been harder, sharper, woodier. It could have been the door. It

could have been a body hitting a wall or something. But there was only one slam. The girl was gone now, so it had to have been the door. If she'd been slammed first, there'd have been two sounds. You take some consolation from that.

You know, however, that you're rationalizing. Whatever the details, something happened tonight, under your roof, and the more it sits with you, the worse it sits with you. Something that caused Tim's date to leave so abruptly was maybe something you and Les should have stepped in on. You are more uncomfortable than ever.

EYES ON THE SCREEN, YOU WISH THE MOVIE WAS SHORTER, BECAUSE YOU CAN'T bear the thought of sitting here, miserable, unable in your current circumstance to comprehend a word of it for another two hours plus. It might as well be a foreign movie with no subtitles and no dubbing, as you stare dumbly at it, not seeing. At the same time, you wish the movie was longer, because as soon it's over, you will have to move, speak, interact. Something more will be expected of you and you're afraid of what that will be, or what effect it will have. For now it's cover to hide behind. *This is what we do on Friday nights.* Instead of watching the moving images, all you can do is watch the digital counter on the DVD player tick over slow seconds.

"*SHIT!!*" It's another gunshot. You jump a foot, your nerves jangled all over again. Tim spikes at full voice over on his side, and throws something into something else with a loud metal clang. Lesley takes another piece of pizza. You don't know how she can. The last bite you had tasted like you were eating the box. Tim works away at something on the other side of the loft, his back to you at his desk. You guess he's found the scissors, or a suitable substitute.

In few minutes, he canters cheerily over to in front of your screen.

"Do you mind?" Lesley says, her irritation plain, craning to look around him. You have to look at him. To do otherwise would be to behave differently, exactly what Lesley told you not to do.

Tim doesn't look like a Muppet now. He used to, his baby face with the short white-blonde hair and goatee framing it top and bottom. He's got his pizza box, the other half of the two-for-one deal you phoned in for at the start of the evening. The orange and white box is greasy and red-smeared, as is his shirt. "Want this?" he asks. "I don't." He doesn't wait for an answer and flings it onto the table, showering crumbs all over, knocking the remote onto the floor and spilling your Diet Coke over the magazines which slide off in a slow cascade, taking

the pizza boxes with them.

"Tim, you idiot!" you cry out and jump up reflexively. Now you're alive, Coke dripping onto your socks. But, oddly, you're shaking, too. "Look at the mess you made!" you say, trying to hold on to the indignation even as your spirit drains away. How many times have you said that?

"Understatement of the year," Tim laughs, unfazed, and bops off.

You don't know what's gone on in the movie, but suddenly, there's Peter O'Toole at a bar, leaking blood in wet stripes through the back of his khaki shirt. Something has happened there, too. You lose it and start to sob tearlessly. "Don't," Les says quietly to you. "It's okay. Just stay in this minute. Get through this minute." She moves to get up. "We need to wipe this up."

"No," you say. Her back is bad tonight, more than usual, which is why it was supposed to be a quiet night in, not worrying about lumpy movie theatre seats, or hard chairs in the pizza place, just the couch and the heating pad she needs. "I'll go get a cloth."

"Wait," she says, "just use these." She hands over the orange and white napkins that came with the pizzas. "Don't bother going all the way over there. Stay here."

You get it. The kitchen is over by Tim's space, near the door. You'll have to go past him to get there. For the first time you realize that maybe Lesley is rattled by him tonight, too. You start mopping up.

Lesley slides awkwardly onto her knees on the area rug, picking up the crusts and crumbs that spilled off your plates. She's moving so painfully. "You shouldn't be doing that," you say.

"No," she agrees, but carries on.

You pick up Tim's pizza box. "It feels like they didn't even eat any." You flip it open and it looks like you're mostly right. Someone's eaten all the outer crust and toppings off, leaving the entire soggy white middle crust underneath, redded over with the remnants of sauce. Maybe *that's* what they fought about, Tim snarfing all the toppings. A word floats into your brain out of nowhere, half-heard and half-remembered. *Pizza-face,* said in a woman's voice. It was part of the fight at the door, the part you hadn't registered before. This makes you smile.

"Gloria." Lesley's voice is tight. She has opened the box after you put it down, to throw the crumbs in. The crumbs are still in her hand as she stares in. Now you see what you didn't before. What's in the box is flat and round and wet, but it's smaller than the large

you ordered, not the twin to yours and Les's anymore. And it isn't sliced, like pizza.

If you thought everything changed before, you were wrong. *This* is when it happens.

What's in the box isn't pizza. It's something bad and it's something to do with the girl, and you don't let yourself think any further than that. This is your mundane life, not a horror movie. Your mind won't go there.

"Glo, this is bad." Les's voice is really strained.

This time it's your turn to deny. "Don't," you say. "He couldn't have done anything. We were sitting right here. Right *here*." But you realize now that Tim never said his date had *left*. He just said she was *gone*.

But you know this is *not* how young pretty women get murdered. It's supposed to happen in dark alleys, or on remote pig farms. It doesn't happen at eight-thirty at night in an urban loft while two aging lesbians eat pizza twenty feet away *in the same goddamned room*, and watch Peter O'Toole and Alec Guinness playact in their Arab robes and hope the roommate keeps the noise down to a dull roar.

Lesley reaches into the pizza box and picks the thing up out of it. The not-pizza thing turns slowly as it dangles between her fingers, and it's as bad and worse than you thought. It's flesh, limp like fabric. You can't make out details, nor do you want to, but your mind fills them in. It's the girl's face, stripped of her skull. Pizza-face. Oh Fuck. Lesley drops it back into the box, breathing hard.

Your brain won't go all the places it needs to at once. This much you know: with the two of you studiously ignoring him, Tim has already had an hour to do what he wants.

You have trouble wrapping your brain around the thought: Tim did this. Not just to his date, but to you. He brought the box over to show off, and to send a message. *This is what I can do.* Implicit in that is a message about what you *can't*. You both need to get out of here, right now, both to notify someone and to escape him. But to leave, you'd have to go through his space and past the kitchen and bathroom and who knows what other horrors lie there. Also, you do not have a way out of here with Lesley, who needs assistance to walk. And you are not going anywhere without Lesley.

But it's Lesley who acts. She rises slowly and grimly, like a swell on the ocean.

"TIMOTHY!!" she thunders.

His head pops up above the back of his futon across the big room. He smirks, knowing he's achieved an effect.

"*DID YOU DO THIS WITH MY GOOD SCISSORS?*"

The smirk fades into a look of surprise. Lesley's in full-volume teacher-voice now. "I WANT THOSE SCISSORS OVER HERE RIGHT NOW AND THEY'D BETTER BE SPOTLESSLY CLEAN!"

Tim's head disappears again. You gasp and hold your breath. Will Lesley's teacher-tone just set him off again? How many times can a grenade go off in one night?

"Grab the phone," she says quietly and urgently to you, while Tim isn't quite looking. He's now in the kitchen, running water and rubbing at something.

You look blankly at Les, your mind whirling. "Just get through one minute at a time," she says. "Get the phone," she repeats.

You try to go there, grateful not to have to think back, or ahead. The phone. It's a cordless and hardly ever where you want to find it. "The phone," Lesley says again, looking at the end-table where it usually sits within her reach while you and Tim are at work. It's not there. "Where is it?"

You have to think back for this. You remember. "It's charging." It started beeping when you phoned for pizza. You also can't help but remember something else: that this was when Tim was still getting along with his date and they both chimed in on the order. You start to shake and try to get back into this minute and only this minute. Where is the charger? In the kitchen. His end.

Tim reappears with the big shears in hand. It is not a sight that gives comfort. He approaches. *Oh, God, what was she thinking?* He's going to hurt you both because you know what he did. He made sure you knew.

"There!" he says. "Happy?"

Lesley, like she doesn't know enough to be afraid, grabs the scissors right out of his hand. He's half-turned to go.

"Timothy!" Les says warningly.

Big, aggrieved sigh, like a kid. "Whaaat?!"

"If I go into that bathroom, is it going to be a pigsty? Because if I go all the way over there with my sore back and it is, there's going to be hell to pay."

He snorts. "You can't walk. You need a bedpan. You can't do anything."

He's summed it up. This is why he could be obliging about the scissors. He's in charge of everything else. Les is, or seems, oblivious. "And you better not have made a mess of Glo's nice clean kitchen!"

"It's a whole fucking week since Gloria cleaned, you stupid cow!" he yells back.

"Then it's your turn now," Lesley says calmly. She shoves the pizza box at him. "And keep your goddamned messes off our side of the loft! What have you been told about that?"

Tim pulls the limp, fleshy mess out of the box, takes a bite out of the middle of the forehead and spits it at Lesley. Then, as he stomps back to his zone, he turns and hurls the entire pizza box through the bathroom door.

YOU DON'T KNOW HOW, OR IF, THIS WILL END. IT FEELS LIKE IT'S BEEN FOREVER since it started, but it's maybe been only another hour. Peter O'Toole is still on the screen, anyway, though you and Lesley aren't making any pretence of watching anymore. Tim is restless in his end of the loft. He doesn't seem to know, either, what happens next. You all know what the standoff is. If he leaves, you and Les will contact the authorities. If you try to leave, he has to do something about you. Until then, you're all trapped in this limbo. You're frightened, but also pissed off that he hasn't thought it through, that you're all stuck like this. He still has his music on and sits on his futon leafing through computer magazines, where he can see you and Lesley and the door. You notice that somewhere along the way, he has taken the phone from the kitchen.

From where you sit, it looks like an ordinary Friday night again, as long as you don't think about what you can't see from here. And, since Lesley told him off about the mess, it's played like an ordinary Friday night, almost like you're all pretending nothing has happened. It's too surreal.

Not everything is frozen in time. The Diet Coke you guzzled earlier with the pizza is killing your bladder now. You can't hold it anymore, and you say so to Lesley. "I don't want to go in there, but I have to. Think he'll let me?"

She shrugs. "When you gotta go, you gotta go," she says, trying a supportive smile. She squeezes your hand.

Tim's head pops up when you walk as nonchalantly as you can over there. He glances at the phone, beside him on the bed, just

to make sure. For your part, you try not to look at anything but the bathroom door. If only you could all pretend nothing had happened. Smears on the floor and the furniture over here catch your eye, though, and you know that isn't possible. The worst of it is probably around the next dresser, or in the kitchen. You're glad the bar-height counter and stools keep the floor out of view for now.

Once in the closet-sized bathroom, added by the developer as an afterthought, you close the door, wincing at the splayed pizza box and its contents plowed against the far wall, under the sink. And suddenly it's just you in the tiny room, gasping at what's been dumped in the shower stall. It makes you gag and almost vomit in the sink. You can't look.

And now you're certain: none of you is getting out of the loft. It's an almost calming thought, because it seems right punishment for your failing to stop it. Tim's date didn't make it out, why should you?

You still need to pee, more than ever, and you turn to the toilet while avoiding looking at what doesn't even look like a person anymore. But even then, you don't pull the shower curtain to hide her—it wouldn't be right. She shouldn't be put out of mind like that. You're ashamed that right now you can't remember her name.

When you're peeing, you hear Les's voice, sharp. "Tim!" There's a long scraping sound. "Gloria!" she shouts urgently. You stop, midstream, jump up, dripping onto the floor, and immediately try to push the door open, but of course you can't. The handle turns, but he's pushed a wardrobe in front of it. Lofts don't come with closets. "*Tim*!" you pound on the door. "Lesley, are you okay?"

So he has thought it out. He's just been waiting for you to move.

"Kill yourself already," you hear Lesley say. "You know you're going to."

Then— "*Glo*—"

It's cut off by another sound, and this time you know it's the sound of a fist on flesh.

You yell and pound. You go berserk, bouncing off the door in your own panic. It's a long time before you stop to catch your breath. And then you hear something—a faint voice, way off.

"*Lesley*!" you scream.

Yelling to each other, she tells you what you need to know. Tim has tied her to a radiator in the other end of the loft, in your bedroom area. He hurt her some, enough that she probably couldn't move

even if she was free. She won't tell you more, because it doesn't seem to matter now. Neither of you is getting out of the loft.

"Did he leave?" you call.

"You could say so," she says. "He's on his futon." After a second's pause, she adds, growing fainter, "He used the good scissors."

Despite everything, you actually laugh at that.

IT'S HOT. YOU FINALLY REMEMBER THAT THE BATHROOM HAS A WINDOW, head-height, that you open, but it's tiny. You'd never fit through it. You wouldn't even have fit through it twenty years ago. It overlooks the alley, but no one's out there now. It's a garment factory on the other side. No one coming to work now till Monday. First break at 9 a.m. when all the immigrant Russian workers go out to the alley to smoke.

Monday. You holler out encouraging things to Lesley while you rummage around the little cupboard in here. She doesn't answer, but you know she's saving her strength. You can make it to Monday, and she can too. And if you're too weak to speak for yourselves, you can drop out a note.

The only paper though, is t.p., which will flutter away in the breeze. Then you see the pizza box. Miracle of miracles, it's the one with the receipt for the order still taped to the lid. Yours and Les's phone number, address, everything. You could add a note on the cardboard. But a grungy pizza box in an alley won't attract any attention, so you need something else.

And then you see it. For real this time. It's spilled out on the floor under the sink like an abortion, a couple of feet away from where it used to belong, on the body in the stall. You very, very gingerly reach out with a tentative finger and spread the flesh out on the tile.

It is her face. It looks wrong, but still real. It's disturbing, which is what you want. Someone will see this. Someone will point and stare. Someone will call out to others. It will attract attention, disrupt the shift, result in authorities being called. Someone will look at the pizza box, and then, someone will come to investigate.

You're suddenly struck by what you're about to do. You didn't help her. But surely she'd help you if she could. You stroke the skin of her cheek lightly. Then you put her in the box, and force the box out the tiny window, praying.

You tell yourself you won't think about how it could still all go

wrong. You should have waited to shove the box out on Monday morning. Stray dogs sniffing it out, an early snow that covers it up, or if it simply lands without spilling its contents.

You tune those thoughts out the way you learned to tune out sounds in the loft.

You call out to Lesley. Someone will come. You sit and wait. ✦

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It's free!

The Speculative Literature Foundation Small Press Co-operative is an organization designed to help small presses within the science fiction, fantasy and horror genres co-operate on projects and exchange useful information.

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Membership in the SLF Co-op is currently open to any self-identifying small press and its representatives (publishers, editors, copyeditors, etc.) -- both online and print presses are welcome to join.

To apply for membership in the SLF Small Press Co-operative, please visit: www.speculativeliterature.org/Co-op for details.

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Zombies

Catherine MacLeod

IT DOESN'T ALWAYS TAKE MAGIC. YOU DON'T ALWAYS NEED a spell to raise them. Sometimes the dead don't have the good sense to fall down.

You've steered around the ones who block the produce aisle. You've cursed the ones who sit in the intersection through three green lights before turning. You've spoken to them often, and voted for them more than once.

But you feel safer thinking they're all in Haiti. Honey, you just keep telling yourself that.

about our contributors

LEAH BOBET studies English Literature and Linguistics at the University of Toronto. Her work has appeared recently in *Strange Horizons* and *Arabella Romances*, and is upcoming in *Realms of Fantasy*. She is a recipient of the Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize and enjoys reading, playing guitar, costuming, and gourmet cooking.

LAURIE CHANNER lives in Toronto, where nothing about her day-to-day life would immediately suggest the dark sensibilities that appear in her fiction. But she's working on it.

Despite this being E.L. CHEN's sixth appearance in *On Spec*, she is not related to or sleeping with any of the editors. She has also been previously published in *Challenging Destiny*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, and *Say... aren't you dead?* Everything else that she doesn't mind you knowing can be found at *www.geocities.com/elchensite*.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK has been a professional illustrator and cartoonist for twenty-five years. Her artwork has appeared in magazines, books, calendars and galleries in Canada, the U.S.A. and Great Britain. She is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Aurora Award for artisitc achievement and works primarily in colored pencil and ink.
Lynne lives in Coquitlam, BC, with her husband, the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk, and their cat (who is in dire need of a head transplant). During the day Lynne works for Raincoast books, the Canadian publisher of Harry Potter.

MELISSA HARDY was born and raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with Honors in Creative Writing, did graduate work at the University of Toronto in history and now lives in Canada, where she works as a Communications Specialist.

Hardy published her first novel, *A Cry of Bees* (Viking 1970) at sixteen; a story cycle entitled *Constant Fire* (Oberon 1995); and a collection of short stories, *The Uncharted Heart* (Knopf Canada 2001), for which she won the Canadian Author's Association Jubilee Award in 2002. In 1995 she won the Journey Prize for the best piece of short fiction to be published in Canada a given year and she was a finalist in the 1999 Western Magazine Foundation Awards. Her work has been included in a number of anthologies, including *Best Canadian Short Stories* (Oberon 1993), Houghton-Mifflin's *Best American Short Stories of 1999* and *Best American Short Stories of 2001* as well as *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, St. Martin's Press, for the years

2002 and 2003. A short story, "*Aquerò*," appeared in the December 2002 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly Magazine*. Hardy is currently working on a novel, *The Mummies of Casteldurante*.

Hardy is married to Ken Trevenna. The couple have, between them, five children and one dog. Her web page is *www.melissahardy.com*.

CATHERINE MACLEOD, fan of Abbot and Costello, Kathe Koja, William Windom, and all things "Wingfield," has published short fiction in *TalesBones*, *Solaris*, *On Spec*, and several anthologies.

HOLLY PHILLIPS is still sensitive about being the only *On Spec* editor to be selling her stories to the good ol' mag, but she is nevertheless very happy to see the sequel to her first-ever sale, "No Such Thing as an Ex-Con," appear in *On Spec*. Only four years down the road! Good golly. How time flies when you're, um, having, er, fun. Holly's first short story collection, *In the Palace of Repose and other stories*, nine fantasy/slipstream/literary stories (three of them reprints), will be published by Sean Wallace at Prime Books, an imprint of Wildside. Technology willing, the hardcovers will be in print in time for a launch at World Fantasy Convention at the end of October.

In the sixteen years JENA SNYDER has been production editor at *On Spec*, she's also been taking courses in crime scene and sudden death investigation, and working on *Cruel & Unusual*, a series of crime/SF novels. She blogs at *editrix.typepad.com*.

TOM SWEENEY has sold three dozen stories to such varied magazines as *Analog*, *Woman's World*, and *Blue Murder*, and to anthologies such as *The Witching Hour* and *The Mammoth Book of Legal Thrillers*. He attended Clarion West in 1999, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Shamus Award. He lives with his wife in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, USA.

PATRICIA SARRAFIAN WARD was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon and now lives in Atlantic Highlands, NJ, U.S.A., with her childhood friend and husband, Tamer, and adopted Greyhound Xena Not-Much-of-a-Warrior. A graduate of the University of Michigan MFA program, her stories have appeared in several journals, and her first novel, *The Bullet Collection*, came out from Graywolf Press in 2003. She is now in the midst of writing a three-book literary fantasy epic in between marionette show engagements, horseback riding lessons, and rowdy evenings throwing darts at the local dive. ✦

in upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by PETER HYNES, PAULINE CLIFT, ANGELO NILES, JEFFREY D. JOHNSON, VALERIE V. DEACON, PETER NORMAN, and many more!

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